RESTITUTION

BY

ANNE BEALE

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VOL. III.

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RESTITUTION

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ANNE BEALE

AUTHOR OF

"FAY ARLINGTON,' 'THE PENNANT FAMILY,'
'SQUIRE LISLE'S BEQUEST,' ETC.

'Fortune, men say, doth give too much to many;
But yet she never gave enough to any.'

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, LIMITED,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.
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RESTITUTION.

CHAPTER I.

MISER AND SPENDTHRIFT.

Gerard had found Loveridge, as Jack had described him, encased in cotton-wool. He had often visited his poorer brethren in hospitals, so the sight was not so strangely grotesque to him as it was to Jack; still, it told of suffering and danger. Loveridge, however, did not give him time to think of this, and began in some excitement to explain himself.

'I want to assure you, Mr. Clarville, that

I had no more to do with the origin of the fire than you had. I am afraid my threat when I left you last night may have led you to believe that I was an incendiary. Not so bad as that. God forbid! I only wanted to frighten you into frightening my—Aspenel to comply with my demands. That matter is settled without your interference. When I heard the cry of "Fire at the Park," I got up and hurried there. I know the place better than you may imagine, and I have been more than once into that awful Gehenna. I felt instinctively—you would say providence inspired me—that the fire began there, and I made for it. I found the hall-door open, and I got into the passage leading to his den. It was full of smoke that half suffocated me. The door was ajar, and I saw—oh, awful sight!—I saw him clutching gold out of what seemed a cupboard. He was surrounded by flames. I rushed through

them and seized him round the waist. He gave a fearful cry, and resisted; but I was the stronger of the two. Could it be that greed and gold overpowered the sense of burning? I dragged him out itno the passage, and I should have saved him but for that door. I stumbled against it with my ghastly burden. It was open when I went, and must have swung to after me. We should both have been burnt to tinder but for you and Jack. As it is—is he—my—is Aspenel alive?'

'He is certainly alive,' put in Gerard. 'But what is the secret of such dire enmity and such unselfish devotion?'

'I cannot tell you without his consent. We have both sinned grievously; he as hoarder, I as spendthrift; but I pray to God—oh, pray with me and for me, that he may be spared so that we may meet and be reconciled. He does not know that it was I who risked my life to save

him; but I did, and would do it again and again. He was not all bad, only so near—so near. Pray for us as I have heard you pray for others not so wicked as we two. Here at my side, so that I may join. I can move my lips if not my hands.'

Gerard knelt down, and prayed as he had never prayed before, for those two injured men. Loveridge followed him, emphasising every word. Gerard had the gift of extempore prayer, and spoke as 'the spirit gave him utterance.'

'Ask for a blessing on the master of this house, and on all whom he loves,' broke in Loveridge.

Gerard did so, and then prayed for the wife and children of the stricken Aspenel, his heart full of Edith. For the first time the recollection of Mrs. Aspenel and Bruce flashed upon him, and he silently supplicated the return of the wanderers. No one had thought of them during that fear-

ful day, which seemed to Gerard many days in one.

'Pray on, pray on, it eases my heart,' said Loveridge; and Gerard poured out his soul to God.

When he rose from his knees the injured man was calm. Gerard asked if he could be of further service.

'In two ways,' he said. 'Will you ask Mr. Harton's son Jack, who helped to save us, to be with me instead of that lady—Miss Vigors, I mean—until I can get away; and will you try to find Mrs. Lee whom they call the "Tigress," and bring her here. I must see her. She was selling tracts on the common yesterday morning, and cannot be far off.'

'I will do my best,' replied over-weighted Gerard, who felt as if, for the present, he could do no more.

Dr. Richards came to see Loveridge, and broke up the interview. Gerard took

his leave, and asked Richards if he might see Nurse True. He at once called her from Aspenel's room. The good woman inquired for her darling, and bade Gerard give her such comfort as he could.

'My master has made an effort to speak,' she said, 'and I think he knows me. Dr. Sant promised to come again to-night. I don't think he had any hopes of him this morning; but I pray God may spare him to repent. It is an awful tragedy, and my mistress nobody knows where. Tell my darling that her nurse will take care of her father, and that she need not trouble about that. Only keep her away till—till he isn't quite so bad.'

Gerard promised everything, and went downstairs to where many anxious friends awaited him. He was glad to see that Miss Vigors was entertaining Harton, senior, with some favourite argument, and that Mr. Austen was talking to his sons.

He whispered Loveridge's request to Jack, who whispered back,

'My step-mother has frightened him to death. She's too strong-minded. He wants a dull fellow like me. Well, I'm his man, and I'll go and tell him so.'

He disappeared, and Tom took up the *rôle*.

'I was just talking to Mr. Austen about Mrs. Aspenel and Bruce. They must be traced, and I will undertake the work.'

'Mrs. Aspenel will hear of the fire through the public papers wherever she may be,' said Gerard. 'It will probably bring her back and save you the trouble.'

Tom frowned and left the room, as he generally did when contradicted. This gave Gerard an opportunity to ask Mr. Austen to set on foot an inquiry for Mrs. Lee, who was somewhere in the neighbourhood. The rector had been superintend-

ing the replacing of the furniture in the unburnt rooms, and fancied he had seen her; but all was such confusion that no one had clear ideas of any person or thing. As to poor Mr. Harton, he was quite overpowered, and declared that he knew not whether he was at home or abroad, in his own or a hired house, in the flesh or in the spirit.

'I am entertaining mine enemy unawares. Will he prove an angel? Here is matter for your sermon next Sunday, Austen. I hope you will put up prayers for us all,' he said.

'I shall do so,' returned the rector. 'If ever we wanted Divine guidance it is now.'

Nurse True came in unsummoned and unannounced.

'It must be something extraordinary to make her forget her manners,' thought Harton.

'My master has suddenly recovered speech and consciousness,' she said. 'He is asking for Mr. Clarville, and will not be satisfied until he is sent for. Dr. Richards says he had better not be crossed, and I am thankful you are still here, Mr. Gerard.'

'I am thankful too, if I can be of any use,' replied Gerard, following Nurse True upstairs, and followed by questioning speeches from his friends.

'Leave us alone,' greeted Gerard, in a hollow voice.

It was, of course, Mr. Aspenel who spoke, and the room was so darkened that Gerard could not see. He was glad of this, for he dreaded a repetition of Loveridge's wool-encased frame. He took the seat vacated by Nurse True at the pillow of the sufferer.

'I want to know who dragged me through the fire. Was it you? It was

you who roused me first,' said Aspenel, in sepulchral tones scarcely audible.

'It was Loveridge who saved your life, sir, not I,' replied Gerard, very quietly and distinctly.

'How?'

'He got into the house after you had opened the door; penetrated to your study and rescued you, thanks be to Almighty God.'

'Is he alive or dead?'

'Alive, and in this house.'

'Bid him come to me at once.'

'He cannot. Like you, he is a prisoner. He is confined to his bed. I have just seen him.'

'Where are we?'

'At Hoplands. Mr. Harton is glad that you are here, and is doing all he can for Loveridge.'

'Where is Edith? Who rescued her?'

'I did. She is with my mother. She

would be here with you, but the doctors forbid just now, because of the late shock to her nerves.'

'Tell me all. Tell me everything.'

Gerard perceived, from the failure of his voice, that he could ask no more questions, so he recounted, as briefly and cautiously as he could, the course of events. Occasional groans alone interrupted him, and whether they were called forth by mental or bodily anguish he could not discover. He concluded with—'No lives are lost, and the frontage of the house and much of the furniture are saved. Let us thank God.'

'My life is lost—my gold, my deeds, are gone,' muttered Aspenel, almost inaudibly; then, as if rousing himself, he added, 'Tell Lady Ascham that I will spare you no longer. You must now work for me—for me.'

'I will do what I can,' said Gerard,

feeling that this was no time for contradiction.

'Tell—tell Loveridge that—I promise the three hundred,' he gasped. 'Go; do it at once.'

Gerard went out upon the landing, and was met by Dr. Sant, who forbade further interviews with either patient. Gerard, thankful for the prohibition, rejoined the party in the dining-room, who overwhelmed him with questions that he dared not answer.

The close of this terrible day was approaching, and those who had been up before the dawn were tired out, Gerard amongst them. The arrangements at Hoplands for the night were made by the doctors, one of whom was to remain. Jack undertook Loveridge, with the aid of a female servant, and Miss Vigors returned to her house; Nurse True remained with Aspenel; Mr. Harton was prevailed upon

to go to bed; while Tom, who was essentially selfish, invited himself to the rectory, upon plea of sacrificing his room to the doctor.

It was late before all these matters were settled, and not only Hoplands but the village was astir till near midnight. Police patrolled the Park and guarded the ruined house, while inquisitive strangers came from afar to look on, for where the hive of excitement is thither swarm the wasps and drones. The few servants who were left at the Park, after the summary notice given by the upper ones, were quartered in the village or at the rectory, and by degrees peace fell on troubled Roselands.

Mr. Austen was the last person to leave Hoplands, and he went thence to perambulate the village and the precincts of the great house in order to see that his parishioners were honest, and had not purloined their neighbours' goods. Happily, the

gipsies were in their tents and the police on the watch.

Gerard was consoled at last by half-an-hour's talk with his mother. He told her everything. She foresaw complications for him on all sides, but she knew that straightforward conduct was sure to bring a man through any labyrinth. They settled that he should go to London on the morrow, and return in the evening. Edith was better, though unusually excitable, and nothing but sudden bodily prostration kept her from going to her father in spite of prohibition. Mrs. Clarville believed that for her individually the fire was a rescue from a state of intolerable mental strain.

Gerard slept well, unconscious even of the nightingales. He breakfasted with his mother, who had alternately watched by Edith and dozed in an easy-chair all night, and who did not give a satisfactory account

of her patient. But Gerard had no time to lose, and was obliged to cut short, not only this subject that interested him so deeply, but inquiries from the ladies, who were watching for him, and from everyone else whom he met on his way to the station. He could see the roofs of the great house in the distance, and it looked like a house cut in two; half of it uninjured, half open to the 'owls and the bats.' A melancholy sight, truly.

Much to Gerard's relief and surprise, he found Mrs. Lee with Lady Ascham. Lady Ascham was going to give a tea to the gipsies, and Mrs. Lee had promised to recount to her wandering brethren the results of her conversion. Others of her tribe would do the same, but it was anticipated that none would have the same effect as the old 'Tigress' and well-known fortune-teller. She had come to London from Roselands the previous evening, ex-

pressly to see Lady Ascham, whose zeal in all home missionary works was unbounded. Her ladyship believed in 'Teas,' followed by religious addresses; and knew by experience, as did Gerard, the good results often produced at such gatherings by homely relations of spiritual good received by individuals present at the entertainment. The gain of a meal was not large enough to create the hypocrite, so they put faith in the poor souls benefited. The treat was to be given the following week, and arrangements were in progress.

Lady Ascham overwhelmed Gerard with inquiries about the fire and its consequences, and he replied as briefly and clearly as he could. He knew that he could trust Lady Ascham, so he mentioned the part Loveridge had played, and, without naming him, told Mrs. Lee that he had expressed a wish to see her.

'He seems to know you, for he said you

were on the common selling tracts on Whit-Monday,' he said.

'I saw him. He is one to sacrifice himself. Reckless of life and friends and character,' exclaimed Mrs. Lee, in much excitement, rising and spreading forth her arms.

She had been seated face to face with Lady Ascham, her hawker's basket at her feet, a subdued light in her fiery eyes, now the fierce glance returned, and she was the 'Tigress' again.

'I must go to him. Perhaps I shall get out of him what he refused to tell me on the common. Shall I go at once?' she proceeded.

'Come to my lodging at seven o'clock this evening, and we will decide,' replied Gerard.

'I cannot wait so long. I can be at Hoplands and back by then. Starvation, death, destruction, must be averted. I

must go—I must go. My lady, I will be at the treat; I will relate my conwersion, I will testify for the Lord; but, if this man wants me, I must not delay lest he die. God bless your ladyship, and you, Gerard Clarville, for spending yourselves for the like of us.'

She waved her outstretched arms, took up her basket and hurried away. Gerard followed her. He led her into his office, and told her that she must be cautious, as excitement might injure Loveridge. He advised her to inquire for Jack—advice which she seized upon at once. She promised to do nothing without Jack's consent. She would appoint a meeting with him, and send a message to Loveridge, but 'there was no time to lose—no time to lose,' she cried, with all her force of will; and, again invoking a blessing on Gerard, she finally departed.

CHAPTER II.

ON HER TRAIL.

Jack found his self-imposed task of nursing Loveridge no sinecure. While his male friends were sleeping off their fatigue that Tuesday night after the fire, he kept vigil. Loveridge was a most impatient patient, and, had he not been so tightly swathed by the doctors, he would probably have rid himself of some of the impediments to movement. He had borne the torture heroically, but could not bear the restraint. Fortunately for Jack, Dr. Richards was in the house, and did not leave him to bear the burden alone. He

forbade conversation, for fear of increase of fever, but told Jack to read to him instead. Jack had two or three numbers of the Franklyn Square Library at hand, and began a tale of adventurous emigration, which soon engrossed Loveridge's attention, until he at last fell asleep. Jack followed his example, and between sleeping and waking, reading and nursing, the night wore through. When Jack waxed melancholy, he revived himself by an inward chuckle at his 'Lap,' as he called his patient, not inappropriately; for nothing of him was to be seen save his eyes, mouth, nose, and nostrils, barely visible through the slits made to enable him to see, smell, and take liquids. A Laplander could not have been more effectually encased in skins than Loveridge in cotton-wool.

However, Nurse True's friend Rebecca came to relieve guard in the morning, and

Jack's temporary self-abnegation ceased for awhile. He and his father breakfasted together, and discussed what was to be done in this wonderful crisis. They came to the conclusion that they must let things take their course, and bear it as philosophically as possible.

'If only Fan were here! She knows all about nursing,' sighed Mr. Harton.

'It would have been jolly to have her to help, instead of Rebecca,' moaned Jack. 'And now all this bother hinders my search for her. Will she ever come back?'

'The squire's groans kept me awake half the night,' broke out Mr. Harton. 'It is an awful visitation. He is no better this morning; Mrs. Trueman fears the worst.'

'Serve him right,' said Jack, whose religious zeal was not fervent enough to overcome his prejudices.

After breakfast he wandered off to the

common, and would have pursued his search for Fan had he not felt that he was needed at home. In the afternoon he resumed his nursing and his reading. Loveridge was pronounced to be going on well; but the doctors shook their heads over Aspenel.

It was nearly six o'clock when a note was brought to Jack. He was entertaining Loveridge with a description of Fan, to which the sick man listened without apparent interest.

'Hurrah! Now I shall find her!' he exclaimed, when he had read the missive. 'Old mother Lee promised to help, and here she is sending for me. I'll be back in no time.'

Jack was gone and replaced by Rebecca before Loveridge could reply. The Tigress had written to say that she was waiting for Jack in the copse at the back of Hoplands. He was at her side

in no time. She was seated on a tree-root.

'You have found her. Where's Fan?' he cried.

'Not so fast, young gentleman. I bring you no news of her; but I want to see the Mr. Loveridge whom your good father has taken into Hoplands. Will you tell him so? There's no time to lose.'

'He mustn't be excited. But perhaps you could read him one of your tracts,' said Jack, with a twinkle of his eye, and a glance towards the basket at her feet.

'I'm no scholar, Mr. Jack Harton, but I'm learning to read. At seventy-six I'm doing what I should 'a done at seven. But I can tell him how the Lord tamed the Tigress, and is ready to make a lamb of him.'

'Bless you, Mrs. Lee, you'll find him in

a full fleece of wool; why, he was as white as snow yesterday, but he's getting a bit soiled,' rejoined Jack, who could never resist a joke.

'Go!' cried the Tigress, waving her arms towards the house.

'I'll give your message, provided you help me to find Fan,' he said, resolutely.

'I will. I am seeking her,' she said.

No sooner had Jack delivered his message than Loveridge begged him to bring Mrs. Lee to him at once, saying she was the woman of all others he wanted to see.

'What will the maids say?' asked Jack.

'Tell them I'm wanting good books, instead of your secular papers,' he replied, attempting to laugh, but restrained by sudden anguish. 'Only the burn on my cheek,' he added, cheerfully.

Jack returned to Mrs. Lee, and con-

ducted her by the back staircase to Loveridge's room. They did, in fact, attract attention, but Jack told the domestics that she was going to sell her tracts upstairs first, and then was coming down to do a little business with them.

'Wait for me in the copse,' she said, as Jack ushered her into the apartment, and she closed the door on him.

'That's cool!' he muttered, and turned on his heel.

Still remembering her promise of help, he went back to the copse and waited. He, like many others, could do anything but wait, and it seemed to him the longest half-hour he had ever spent.

'Confound the birds, how they do sing. It makes a fellow melancholy when all the world's at sixes-and-sevens. They've no feeling, or they couldn't be so cheerful,' he philosophised. 'And Fan, who used to feed them in the

winter, gone, nobody knows where. Oh, Fan, Fan. I wish you would come back!'

The Tigress returned at last. She looked fierce and solemn. Jack questioned her about Loveridge, but she declined to give any information. All she said was, that she did not know what would become of him if he should be maimed for life.

'And all for that miser!' she groaned.

'And Fan?' asked Jack.

'I will surely find her if you stick to your promise of marrying her,' she answered.

'Only get us a parson, and I'll marry her before your eyes. But father would like to have a hand in giving her away, so perhaps we'd better wait for the rector.'

'I'll send you a line soon; I'm on her trail.'

'Oh! you dear old South American huntress!' cried Jack, catching hold of her

hand and wringing it. 'If you bring her to me you shall have a corner of our wigwam as long as you live.'

Something like a tear moistened her black eyes, and she took up her basket, saying, 'God bless you for the kind word,' and plunged into the copse.

No sooner did Jack reach home than he was sent off again in search of Gerard. If he had not returned he was to be telegraphed for, since Mr. Aspenel would not be quieted without him. Nurse True and the doctors agreed that he was essential to him. Jack found Gerard at tea. He had but lately arrived, and was about to go to Hoplands. Edith was in the drawing-room, with Mrs. Aspenel and Gerard, and Jack could not but think what a happy trio she helped to form. She was better, and declared herself able to go to her father.

Jack called Gerard out to deliver his message, but her sensitive mind imagined

something wrong. Gerard reassured her by saying that Mr. Aspenel must be better since he was able to think of business. Lady Ascham had bade him forget her and her charities, and think of nothing but that greatest of all charities, returning good for evil. He was to devote himself to Mr. Aspenel.

He had spent the day at his old office, gathering such informatian as the anxious clerks and others could give, and furnishing particulars of the fire to the crowds that besieged it. Piles of letters were awaiting Aspenel, which, after due consideration, were entrusted to him. All concerned were aghast at the catastrophe, not knowing what the end could be. Men, whether millionaires or not, never anticipate the sudden strokes of Providence. It was understood that Gerard knew as much as anyone of the affairs, and everybody trusted him, as people do the strictly

truthful, honourable, and straightforward.

'Tell papa I am ready to come to him,' said Edith. 'Ask him what he wishes me to do, and I will do it.'

Simple obedience. That had been always her motto, and Gerard knew it. She looked whiter and more fragile than ever, as she lay curled up on the sofa, yet none more resolved than she, where duty called. He was happy in thinking that the memory of her escape from the fire was merged in anxiety for her father. But for this, how happy she would have been in the peaceful haven of Mrs. Clarville's tiny home!

Gerard found Mr. Aspenel's mind clear but excited. The room was still darkened, and he saw but little of the swathed and stricken man. His voice was low, but less sepulchral than the previous day, and the doctors thought him slightly better. Gerard told him at once, and without circumlocution, that Lady Ascham relinquished his

services, so long as he could be of use to him, and that he placed himself wholly at his disposal. The 'Thanks' that succeeded, though but one word, sounded emphatic. Then Gerard related what he had done at the office and elsewhere, and alluded cautiously to the heaps of letters.

'Read them, and give me a summary of their contents,' said Aspenel. 'I must negotiate through you with clients as well as lawyers. I can see no one else.'

'Miss Aspenel is anxious to come to you. She is better,' ventured Gerard.

'Not till I am back at the Park. That must be managed at once. I constitute you my agent, steward, what you will. Get workmen and see that what remains of the house is safe. I can rebuild at leisure when I get back. See that the ruins of my study are boarded up, and let no one meddle with them. Write to the insurance company, "Fire and Flame,

Limited." I shall have a fight with them.'

Gerard knew that they would dispute his claim, because Aspenel had himself been the cause of the fire; but he did not venture to say so. Indeed, Nurse True had warned him not to contradict him. His best chance was to ease, as much as possible, his over-burdened mind. He unloaded it himself by degrees, giving Gerard commission after commission so rapidly that at last he begged to be allowed to go to the window and write them down, saying that his memory was less retentive than Mr. Aspenel's. He managed to let the light in obliquely, so that its declining rays fell on him, and not on the bed where the sufferer lay.

He had always looked on Aspenel as a genius; now he found him to be one of the most remarkable of his century; for there are geniuses and geniuses. A marvellous memory, an inborn talent for money-get-

ting, a self-absorbed power of organization, a vision unbounded by sea or shore; and is not that genius as great as is that of any poet, romancer, or philosopher, who works for earth, not heaven? Gerard thought it was, and wished it had glorified God. Was it too late? In spite of the fire and consequent suffering, the mind—or soul, or spirit, which was it?—seemed to grasp the universe in its flight from the stock-exchange, bank, office, shipping, at home; to argosies, mines, and multitudinous speculations abroad. Nothing escaped it but the grim shadow, Death.

How long this essential part of the complex organization, called man, could have held out Gerard did not know; for Nurse True came in to say that Dr. Sant had arrived, and wished to see her master at once.

'Come again,' muttered Aspenel, as Gerard left the room.

Jack was waiting for him to request him to visit Loveridge. He found him quite animated, for the doctor pronounced him on the road to recovery.

'Time and patience is what they preach,' he said, as Gerard approached him. 'I haven't much of either, for this emigration scheme hampers me.'

'Mr. Aspenel promises the three hundred a-year,' said Gerard, and the announcement caused Loveridge to start, and to utter a cry of pain.

'I could not leave him while he is in danger. I must see him first,' he moaned.

'He, also, wishes to see you.'

'Thank you; thank God for that, Gerard Clarville. The Tigress has been, and I must thank you for that also; but, more than all, I thank you for a strange peace that stole over my soul after your prayers the other evening. When was it? Weeks

ago, I think. Mrs. Lee calls it the peace of God, after repentance. Ask Him for more: for His continual peace.'

Gerard was much affected, and could scarcely command his voice when he once more knelt down and asked for help for this man of whom he knew so little. This he knew, however, that he was a sinner needing pardon, who had lately escaped from the jaws of death; and that 'there is joy in Heaven over one such that repenteth.'

He obtained permission to look in on Aspenel before he left for the night.

'Has anything been heard of Mrs. Aspenel and Bruce?' asked the melancholy voice. 'They must be found.'

'Tom Harton is searching for them,' replied Gerard.

'They must be advertised for. He is not to be trusted. He has his own ends, and works for gain. Thank old Harton

for his hospitality. That is unselfish.'

'Quite,' responded Gerard. 'May I take a message to Miss Aspenel?'

'My love, and she must go back to the Park as soon as it is habitable. Where do you live?'

'Partly with my mother; but I sleep at Mrs. Lucy's, who is from home.'

'Set about the Park. We must return at once.'

With this concluding order the deep voice ceased, and Gerard retired.

CHAPTER III.

AN ENCOUNTER IN THE BOIS DE BOULOGNE.

During all these startling events, Janet was in Paris with Monsieur and Madame de Belleville. They had been there about a fortnight, in an apartment not far from the Arc de Triomphe, and Janet was enjoying herself, as she always did in the queen of cities. She was pursuing the studies of painting and pleasure together, and scarcely knew which she liked best. She was much admired both by French and English, and would have been in a fair way to be spoilt, but for an unforeseen event which brought her to her senses the

evening before she had news of the fire and of her father's condition—on Whit-Tuesday, in fact.

She was walking with Monsieur de Belleville and his son, Maximilien, in the Bois de Boulogne. They had reached the lake, and were standing to watch the swans—a remarkable-looking trio, noticed by the passers-by. Janet, as we have already said, invariably attracted attention, and was not unconscious of it. She was talking to her friends of Edith's swans, and forgot herself and her surroundings for the moment in an animated description of her sweet, pale sister, and her snow-white birds. They had often heard the sketch before, but never tired of anything Janet had to say.

It was a glorious June evening, and the clear blue sky, the green woods, the pellucid lake, with the smiling islands in its midst, together with the gay crowds that

passed and repassed, roused her spirits and therewith her descriptive powers to their utmost extent. Carriages rolled, horses pirouetted, pedestrians footed it to and fro, to and fro, in giddy maze, while she and her friends talked and laughed hilariously. For the time she forgot her surroundings in their pleasant babble, and they all gesticulated and chatted as if they had something important to say. Such is the way with French people, and Janet was now half French.

A swan moved majestically towards her, and she stooped to attract it by a piece of bread. Suddenly she was pinioned and almost projected into the lake. Someone or something had jumped upon her with a cry half human, half animal. Which was it? Human, assuredly, for it subsided into the word, 'Janet.' As she struggled to uplift herself, two arms encircled her neck, kisses echoed upon her

cheek, and she recognised her assaulter.

'Bruce! Bruce! Is it really you?' she cried, hugging her brother, who had once been her torment.

'You have come to fetch us! I want to go home,' said the boy, seizing her by the hand as if afraid she would escape him. 'Mammy says she will go home when we are fetched.'

'Where is she? Take me to her,' said Janet. Then to Monsieur, 'This is my brother Bruce.'

'Mammy is ill. The wife of the *concièrge* brought me here to see the swans. They are just like Edith's swans. Oh, Janet, let us come home.'

The wife of the *concièrge* came up in some confusion. 'Madame would be angry,' she said, 'as she was in retirement, and wished to remain *incognita;* she must take the young gentleman back at once.'

But Bruce clung to Janet, who declared

her intention of accompanying him wheresoever he went.

'Impossible, mademoiselle. We live at Neuilly. We go back by tramvay. This is Monsieur Bruce's *jour-de-fête*, and I brought him here to amuse him,' said the woman.

'Neuilly,' mused Janet. 'That is where Pauline lived; you are Pauline's mother.'

'Pardon, mademoiselle; but I am not at liberty to say,' returned the woman. 'I have orders to be back by eight o'clock. Come, Monsieur Bruce.'

'I shall accompany you. Monsieur, you will also go. Maximilien will return and explain to Madame,' said Janet, with decision.

Monsieur knew something of the circumstances of the case, and assented at once. He told the woman that he would take all responsibility on himself, that mademoiselle was Madame Aspenel's step-daughter,

and that he would see that no harm should result to anyone concerned, from this unexpected meeting. Bruce clenched his argument by declaring that he would not leave Janet; and Madame la Concièrge knew that he had a will of his own. So had Janet, apparently, for her orders were obeyed.

They all reached Neuilly by eight o'clock, and a short walk down a long boulevard brought them to a tall house, enclosed in a small garden. Bruce dragged Janet on so rapidly that they were on the *rez de chaussée* before their elders were at the gate. The first person she saw was Pauline, who was on the look-out for Bruce. She started at sight of Janet, who hurried towards her, offered her hand, and said in French,

'You need not be afraid, Pauline. I will get no one into trouble. I am going straight to Mrs. Aspenel with Bruce. I am

as glad to have found her, as you must have been to have found Jean Jacques. Bruce says you are to be married soon.'

'Oh, mademoiselle! You cannot mount to madame's *appartement*. Impossible; she would be furious.'

'This way, Janet, this way.' And Janet followed Bruce *au quatrième*, and was breathless when she reached the *étage*.

She had not considered consequences, and did not wait to do so, when she found herself on the landing of a small *étage*, and went with Bruce into an untidy *salon*, which communicated with a *chambre-à-coucher*. She understood it all, and whispered to Bruce to go in first.

'Mammy, here's Janet!' shouted the boy, opening a door and displaying a light, gauzy-looking curtained fabric in which lay Mrs. Aspenel. 'She's come to fetch us.'

'Janet!' shrieked that lady, sitting up.

'Yes, dear, you must be surprised,' said Janet, with all the nonchalance she could assume. 'I met Bruce in the Bois, and came here with him. But how ill you look!'

She kissed Mrs. Aspenel, who received her coldly.

'I did not know you were in Paris,' she said.

'Nor I that you were here. But we have found one another, and I am so very glad,' said Janet, enthusiastically.

'Glad! Why should you be glad to run me to ground who only want to hide from your father and all belonging to him? I thought I was safe here, but I must go elsewhere, I suppose.'

'I will not tell anyone that I have found you, if you would rather not. I will wait for your consent. But Edith says that everything has changed since you left. Papa is more reserved and difficult than

ever; the servants have nearly all departed; half the house is shut up; and poor Edith left to her own devices.'

'Has he struck her? Has he threatened her?' asked Mrs. Aspenel, frigidly.

'I do not know; I hope not. I am not to return home till I have quite finished my education; I have not been back since our brilliant introduction into society. I have not completed my conquest of Lord Beechton's son and heir; and now I mean to stay and nurse you. Papa Belleville is downstairs, and lets me do anything I like.'

'We will all go back to the Park,' shouted Bruce, who had been listening. 'Janet, mammy hasn't got enough to eat. Pauline says so.'

Janet shrewdly suspected that Mrs. Aspenel's resources were exhausted. She looked worn and neglected, and Bruce's dress was shabby. The apartment also

had a forlorn air, and it was difficult to recognize the Mrs. Aspenel of the Park in the hopeless-looking invalid before her.

'Why did you leave home, dear?' asked Janet, coaxingly. 'I suppose it was the result of that one great expenditure of all papa's limited resources. I felt sure his ruin would be completed; and, after all, the game wasn't worth the candle, for nothing came of it but disappointment. I wish you would forget what a disagreeable child I was years ago, and look on me as—as—a sister, you know, and trust me.'

There was something so winning in Janet's half-satirical, half-pathetic manner, that Mrs. Aspenel was touched. Bruce, too, had climbed upon the girl's lap, and looked entreatingly at his mother, crying out,

'Do let us go home with Janet, mammy.

I want my pony, and Nurse True, and Edith. And I want to see papa. He will be good if we beg his pardon. That's what Tom Harton used to be when he made me say I was sorry, and I wasn't.'

Mrs. Aspenel laughed, and said that would be exactly her case; then she bade Bruce go and entertain Monsieur de Belleville while Janet stayed with her. The ruse succeeded, and step-mother and daughter were left together. Mrs. Aspenel told Janet that she would confide in her, if she faithfully promised to keep her secret until permitted to divulge it, and on no account to let anyone know that she had found her. To this Janet demurred; but finally promised, with a private and somewhat Machiavellian reservation, that, as monsieur had found her as well, there was no reason that he should not betray the place of her exile, if necessary. Then Mrs. Aspenel recounted what we already know of her

husband's treatment after the festivities, and her subsequent flight.

'No one can tell what I have endured all my married life,' she added. 'But I bore it because I was too proud to complain. But when your father struck me, and cursed me, and would have knocked me down, I resolved to submit no longer. I left, as you know, under false pretences of visiting friends, and came direct here. The money I brought away with me is gone, and most of my jewels are sold. I am maturing plans for a separation, or the receipt of my jointure; but I have no one to advise, and I hate publicity. Your father would not allow me a penny unless the law commanded. I sometimes think of consulting Mr. Tom Harton, but there are difficulties and complications everywhere.'

'Don't consult him! He isn't true!' cried Janet, impulsively; and Mrs. As-

penel's sudden confidence relaxed, and she grew reserved again.

'Of course, I must do something, as I cannot ruin Bruce's prospects,' she said. 'But for him I would starve rather than communicate with your father again. Neither Edith's mother nor yours endured as long as I have done; and I have no wish to die, as they did, and be a third holocaust to Blue Beard.'

Janet had nothing to say, for she sympathised entirely with Mrs. Aspenel, and was not diplomatic enough to use deceit.

'Perhaps he might improve if you returned,' she ventured, after a pause. 'Edith says she thinks he has been unhappy and gloomy ever since you left.'

Mrs. Aspenel's face softened, for she would have loved this man if he had let her. Janet saw her advantage, and proceeded to recapitulate what she had heard Nurse True say of the increased expendi-

ture and liberality at the Park during her reign, as compared with previous years.

'I heartily pity my predecessors,' said Mrs. Aspenel, with one of her old sarcastic laughs.

'Monsieur de Belleville says you must come home now, and return here to-morrow,' broke in Bruce at the moment, who, thanks to Pauline and a French *bonne*, had learnt to speak fluent French before coming to Paris.

'I will be here the first thing to-morrow,' cried enthusiastic Janet. 'I have a five-franc piece which will do for the present; but, like you, I am generally at the end of my sous. You mustn't refuse, dear. You can pay it back when we are all at the Park again.'

She took the silver piece from her purse, laid it on her bed, kissed her step-mother, and ran downstairs followed by Bruce.

Mrs. Aspenel burst into tears. She had

been flying from fate or duty—which was it?—and fate had overtaken her in the person of this high-spirited, generous-hearted girl, whom she had done so little to conciliate in past years. Providence was stronger than she. The months that had elapsed since she left her home had been even more miserable than the years she had spent in it; and her small apartment had been her prison. She had rarely left it until nightfall, for fear of meeting some one who might recognise her; for, although decided and even imperious when irritated, she was easily cowed. This was why she had borne, uncomplainingly, much that she might otherwise have resisted, and it was this reticence which had held her back from letting her relations know how she was situated. She had no near ones, but her uncles and cousins would stand by her, she thought. Still, what could a penniless wife do against a rich

and resolute husband? Nothing, she had been persuaded, but leave him secretly. She had done this, and taken her boy with her.

It was this boy, the heir of untold wealth, that troubled her. She was even meditating sending him back surreptitiously to his father, only she believed the parting would kill her. She little guessed that at the moment when he flung himself into his sister's arms that father was lying burnt, disabled, all but dead, at the house of the father of the man to whom she had thought of confiding her son. Tom Harton had always understood and pitied her, and she believed she might trust him.

This apparition of Janet, however, changed the current of her thoughts and plans, and she felt as if suddenly brought back from death to life. She knew not which to prefer; but, when Bruce bounded

in with all the delighted exuberance of childish joy in word and action, she thought life was best.

'Janet has come to fetch us home,' was his cry, and when Pauline echoed it she was half inclined to join.

Too late! Too late! There was no home, and Aspenel Park was a scene of desolation; its owner the miserable wreck of what had once been the husband who had purchased her by his gold.

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

Janet came the following morning to Neuilly with a letter she had just received. She was in breathless excitement. She scarcely allowed herself time to greet Mrs. Aspenel before she cried out:

'I have had awful news. The Park is burnt down. No lives lost, but—but——' And then the feelings which she had restrained gave way, and she threw herself on her step-mother's bed.

Mrs. Aspenel took the letter and read it. It was from Mrs. Clarville, written at Edith's request, and contained the account

of the fire, and of Mr. Aspenel's condition, worded as cautiously as possible. Edith had not rested till this was written, fearing that Janet might get the news first from the public journals. The letter concluded by a request that Janet would not attempt to leave Paris until she heard again, as, were she at home, she could be of no use, since Edith was with Mrs. Clarville and her father at Hoplands, cared for by Nurse True. As Mrs. Clarville wrote for the post on Whitsun Tuesday, she could give few particulars, and those she did give were well veiled.

'This is awful!' exclaimed Mrs. Aspenel. 'I will go back. He may die, and Bruce away, and I unforgiven!'

She clasped her hands in agony. Janet took them, and for awhile no more words came from either.

'Monsieur and Madame Belleville say that we must do nothing rashly,' she said,

at last. 'We must wait for letters and further intelligence. But how? I cannot bear the suspense.'

'Nor I, Janet. Any certainty is better. We will pack up and be ready to leave at a moment's notice. I sent Bruce out for a walk with Pauline; when they return she shall begin.'

'To see you unexpectedly after all these months might kill him outright. Besides, there is no room for us anywhere, if the Park is burnt down,' returned Janet. 'Darling Edith must be in danger, or she would have written herself. Perhaps they are all burnt to death, and this is a preparatory letter.'

'No; it is not so bad as that, Janet. We must await to-morrow's post. I will get up; I could not survive the suspense here in bed.'

Mrs. Aspenel was suffering more from mental depression than from physical ill-

ness, and she rose instantly. Janet helped her to dress, and these two were drawn together by this common anxiety more stringently than they had ever been before. All previous animosity merged in an awful terror lest the husband and father should die unconscious, unrepentant, unforgiven.

'And Bruce; I had no right to take him from his father. When he grows up he will hate me for it, and reproach me for depriving him of a last farewell,' cried Mrs. Aspenel, whose self-reproaches overpowered Janet's terrors. 'He may have disinherited him; but that is secondary. I hate, I abhor the dross for which I sacrificed my peace and happiness. I will ask for his forgiveness and relinquish everything.'

Bruce and Pauline came in and turned the current of distress for a time. They were astonished to see Mrs. Aspenel up and

dressed, and Bruce supposed they were to start at once for home.

'You have none. It is burnt to the ground,' cried the mother, embracing her boy, who looked to Janet for explanation. She was now calm and self-possessed, and took upon herself to tell Bruce and Pauline as much as she thought necessary of the contents of the letter, softening the details of her father's injuries, by the words, 'All lives were saved.'

'My pony's too?' inquired Bruce, ruefully; but no answer was forthcoming.

After much consultation it was decided that Janet should write to Mrs. Clarville without mentioning Mrs. Aspenel. They came to the conclusion that it would only add to the general anxiety at Roselands to hear that she was discovered, and meditated a return. Madame de Belleville came in the course of the morning, and was introduced to Mrs. Aspenel. There was no

time to consider whether this was prudent or not. In moments of great emergency, scheming is forgotten, and facts are laid bare. Madame de Belleville was kind, sympathetic, and devoted to Janet. She knew most of the circumstances connected with Mrs. Aspenel from her friend, Lady Ascham, and Janet, and she guessed the rest. She advised her to wait; and there seemed no other course to pursue, for, on further consideration, the millionaire's wife, son, and daughter could not muster money enough amongst them to return to England.

The day wore through somehow, and Janet went back with madame to her avenue near the Arc for the night. Monsieur and Maximilien did their best to console her; but with little effect.

The next morning she had a few lines from Gerard, and a letter from Nurse True, written in her father's sick-room. These

bade her be patient, and wait till she could be summoned home without danger of excitement to Mr. Aspenel or Edith. Indeed, such was the horror of the writers at her father's state that they insisted on her remaining where she was for the present. They both hoped his injuries would prove less dangerous than was at first imagined.

'All is in God's hand, my deary,' concluded Nurse True. 'He can bring good out of evil. Pray to Him for us all.'

Both Janet and Mrs. Aspenel realised that nothing but prayer could avail them at such a crisis. They spent another day together, and Janet assured her friends, the De Bellevilles, that but for Mrs. Aspenel she would have gone home at all risks. That evening, Maximilien came to fetch her, and brought with him a letter that had arrived by the late mail. It was from Edith, and gave them both heart. She could only write as she heard, and

everybody made the best of her father's state to her.

'You shall come home as soon as possible, darling,' she wrote, 'At present there is no place for you. We are billeted on our friends as it is, and we owe all—life even—to Cousin Gerard. Although I am almost well, I cannot write details yet; they frighten me. Everyone is kind, but I am forbidden to see papa, and the doctors say he must not be excited. Gerard has seen him. I think much of Mrs. Aspenel and Bruce. If she hears of the fire from the papers, the shock will be terrible. I wish she would write. Perhaps she may if she gets the news. She is so generous and kind-hearted that I am sure she would condone the past if she realised the state we are in.'

This paragraph took instant effect on Mrs. Aspenel.

'This from Edith? How kind!' she

exclaimed. 'I thought she would have condemned me wholly.'

'On the contrary, she has tried to trace you through all your friends, in the hope of bringing you back,' said Janet. 'Her diary was full of regrets; I have it with me. I will bring it to-morrow and show you what she says.'

To-morrow brought a more coherent and lengthy letter from Edith, still giving details as she received them, and enlarging on the fact that she now understood that a stranger had rescued her father who, with him, was lying in a precarious state at Hoplands. Neither Janet nor Mrs. Aspenel could understand how little Edith really knew of the condition of rescued and rescuer; but of Gerard and her own safety she wrote in no measured terms.

'No one can describe the kind consideration of all our friends and neighbours,' she said. 'The ladies are indefatigable, and

have undertaken, with Mr. Austen, to make a part of the Park habitable, which poor papa wishes done at once. Every order comes through Mr. Clarville, who is worn out. I pray to be allowed to undertake the nursing, but Mr. Harton will not hear of it. He and Mr. Jack come here when they can, but they have enough to do. Nurse True has never left poor papa night or day. Mr. Tom Harton is absent —gone, his father thinks, to try to find Mrs. Aspenel and Bruce.'

This piece of information called forth a startled exclamation from Mrs. Aspenel.

'Why should he seek us?' she cried. 'He, of all men, would be the last I should wish to find me as I am.'

'Edith told me it was he whom papa despatched in search of you, soon after you left,' replied Janet.

'Happily he did not find us. That would have been very humiliating,' replied

Mrs. Aspenel, with a touch of her old irony. 'Still, I almost wish he had, for then I should, perhaps, have been spared this tension.'

The next letter was from Gerard, and contained a message from Mr. Aspenel to Janet; was written, indeed, for the purpose of giving it.

'Your father wishes you to remain where you are until you can come direct to the Park. When that may be I cannot tell, for it is difficult to ascertain how far the rooms that remain are safe. We have architects and workmen coming at once. I write from his room; almost at his dictation. He sends his love to you, and bids me say that he is really ruined at last, and you must turn your talents to account. He is certainly better, and his mind is quite clear. Dear Janet, it is a time of intense anxiety. Your sister makes light of her own weakness, but she is still nerv-

ous, and you will understand how her over-conscientiousness keeps her on a constant strain. Mr. Aspenel puts faith in me, fortunately, and I do what I can. He has begun to worry about Bruce, and wishes me to advertise for Mrs. Aspenel. I wish she would come back.'

'I will! I will!' interrupted Mrs. Aspenel. 'Nothing shall hinder me if Mr. Clarville says that. He, at least, is honest. I will write to him for advice. I will return at all risks. I have been resentful, false, a bad wife, an unkind step-mother—'

'Not intentionally. That was my fault,' put in Janet, throwing herself on the polished floor at her feet. 'We have made that up long ago, and now we will all begin life afresh. We can open a school, or do a hundred things, if papa is really ruined.'

The girl laughed, and Mrs. Aspenel could not help joining, for both knew that it

would take more than one fire to ruin the millionaire.

'You and Bruce are to come back to the avenue with me,' said Janet, imperatively. 'Monsieur and Madame expect you, and Maximilien is dying to make your acquaintance. *Il se meurt* easily, and is resuscitated by galvanism, I tell him, at which he places his hand on his heart and talks of the galvanism of my eyes.'

This sally aroused Mrs. Aspenel, who, after a little hesitation, consented to accompany Janet to Monsieur de Belleville's. Bruce was in uproarious spirits at the prospect, and the trio soon found themselves in the tram, which went nearly from door to door. The sky and air were clear, the boulevards delightful, and beautiful Paris *toujours gai;* so they forgot for the moment that distant spectre which had been haunting them for the past week. *Déjeûner* was awaiting them, and their kind

friends received them with effusion. Mrs. Aspenel revived under the influence of a large cheerful apartment and French cordiality, and the little party began to discuss ordinary topics almost naturally. They were just about to sit down to *déjeûner*, when a servant announced that a gentleman wished to see Miss Aspenel.

'Without doubt it is Monsieur Hazelwood, who is in Paris, *en route* for the Antipodes,' said Madame. 'Show him in, Marie.'

All eyes were turned from the repast to the door. Janet rose involuntarily, expecting to see her old friend's brother, but she was disappointed. So was Mrs. Aspenel, though a handsome and more polished knight-errant could scarcely have appeared. The visitor was, in fact, Mr. Tom Harton.

It would be difficult to imagine a more inauspicious encounter, but Tom Harton

was equal to any occasion. He shook hands with Mrs. Aspenel as if he had seen her yesterday, told Bruce that he must return to his studies, and informed Janet that he had merely run over to Paris to acquaint her with the particulars of the fire, and to be of use if possible.

The conventionalities of society cover a multitude of sins, and Mrs. Aspenel, after the first surprise, recovered her self-possession and introduced 'our friends Monsieur and Madame de Belleville, and their son Monsieur Maximilien.' Harton spoke French like a native, and readily accepted an invitation to an interrupted meal. A lively conversation ensued, in which all joined save Mrs. Aspenel. He gave a graphic account of the fire, and said Mr. Aspenel was recovering from his injuries, of which he made light. In short, he cast a different colouring over the late events from that put in by other hands, and raised

the depressed spirits of Janet, to the infinite delight of her friends and admirers. He had not quite so happy an effect on Bruce, who glanced at him suspiciously from time to time, between the delicacies heaped upon his plate by madame, and could not enjoy them as much as he otherwise would. And who can describe all the *friandises* of a French *déjeûner !*

What Harton thought was known only to himself and his biographer. He did not let it be seen that he was really pained at the alteration in Mrs. Aspenel's appearance and manner, or that he had come to Paris under the vague impression that she was somewhere in France with her maid, Pauline. He kept to himself a certain determination not to lose sight of her again, and to have her husband informed of her whereabouts; and he also reserved his admiration of Janet, and his aspirations after her or Edith, it mattered not which.

He spoke modestly of his own achievements at the fire, and left the rest to the imagination of his hearers. But, when the *déjeûner* was over, he asked for an interview with Mrs. Aspenel, which she reluctantly granted.

CHAPTER V.

FAN AGAIN.

WHILE the secretive Mr. Tom Harton was pursuing his schemes in Paris, his open-hearted brother Jack was very differently engaged. Their easy-going father had always let them have their own way, as he had done their mother, Fan, and his belongings generally; and so people said, 'Old Harton had no one to blame but himself,' whenever the world went wrong with him. On the occasion of the fire, however, he certainly could not be called to account for the difficulties that fell upon him. But he comfortably shelved them

upon Jack's shoulders, and resumed his usual habits.

'My house is turned into an inn, and I am one of the lodgers,' he said, philosophically, to his comforter, Miss Vigors. 'I'm thankful that they've left me my room.'

'They're making such way at the Park that the front rooms will soon be ready,' said Jack. 'I only hope the patients won't die first. Mine is getting on, but Gerard's is less hopeful.'

'Mr. Gerard is worked to death!' exclaimed Miss Vigors. 'And so we all are, for that much.'

This passed about ten days after the fire. While Jack was about to make a somewhat uncomplimentary remark about finding work for idle hands, a letter was brought to him by a servant, with a request for an answer. He opened it.

'Say I'll come at once,' he cried. 'Miss

Vigors, you must take my place with my patient. He won't like it, but there's nobody else. Father, I don't know when I shall be back; but I must go. I'm off to town on special business. You shall know all about it in time. Don't like to raise your hopes, but I'm after Fan.'

'Fan! If you find Fan, you shall have —my blessing; for Tom's got the entailed and much-encumbered property,' laughed Mr. Harton.

And Jack hurried to the back-yard, where a gipsy messenger awaited him. He said he would meet Mrs. Lee at the station, and then lost no time in picking up hat and walking-stick, and rushing upstairs to Loveridge.

'I've had a summons from Mother Lee. You must put up with somebody else for a few hours,' he said, abruptly.

'All right. Don't think of me. I should be well if I could get rid of this

confounded cotton-wool,' replied Loveridge.

Jack strode off to the station, where he found the Tigress meekly selling her tracts. The train arrived almost immediately, and he followed her and her basket into a third-class carriage. The compartment was tolerably full, so they had no conversation, but she utilised her opportunities by continuing the sale of her books, and by preaching to her astonished fellow-travellers. 'In season and out of season,' she whispered to Jack, who was not altogether pleased by her confidence, and wanted to hear about Fan.

When they reached London Bridge she took him by omnibus to the entrance of a small street not far from Mr. Aspenel's office, where they dismounted and walked to a decent house, where the windows were emphasised by the word 'Lodgings.' They were let in quickly, and she led the

way up three flights of stairs. He followed. Arrived on the landing of the third story, she paused, and turning to Jack, said,

'I can make nothing of her. See what you can do; go in.'

She cautiously opened a door, peeped in, drew back, and impelled Jack forwards. Scarcely knowing what he was doing, he entered a small room and heard the door close behind him. Standing at the window, which was open, and apparently looking out, was the figure of a girl, the pose of which he recognised at once.

'Fan, Fan!' he cried, in a voice so jubilant that it startled the watcher into turning slowly round.

'Jack!' she exclaimed, and would have fallen had not he caught and supported her. 'Jack!' she repeated, with frightened eagerness, withdrawing from

him, and gazing at him as if he were a spectre.

'Yes, Fan, I'm Jack, and no mistake,' he cried. 'I've come home on purpose to find you, and I've found you, my dear; and we'll never part again—never.'

'Oh, Jack!' she sobbed, falling on her knees beside a small table, leaning her elbows on it, covering her face with her hands, and breaking into sobs.

'This will never do, Fan,' he said, laying his hand on her head, whilst tears filled his honest eyes. 'You must cheer up, and come home with me.'

'I cannot—I must not,' she sobbed, seizing the hand, kissing it, and letting her tears fall upon it.

'You can and must, my dearest Fan. Get up like a good child, and tell me all about it.'

She rose and stood beside him with a sort of shamefaced dignity. He looked at

her, and the expression of his face changed from joy to sorrow. She was altered; the red rose on her brown cheeks had paled; the brilliancy of her eyes had faded; even the gloss of her raven locks was dimmed. She did not look him fearlessly in the face, as of old; she did not lay her hands in his and give him the sisterly kiss as when they parted; she only stood and waited for him to speak.

There was an old couch in the corner of the room, and he led her to it. She was trembling and sobbing still. He sat down beside her, and took her hand kindly.

'What is it, Fan? Tell me all. Have you done wrong? Why did you go away? Who brought you to this place? I shall never blame you, whatever has happened.'

'Dear Jack, will you promise not to tell, if I confess everything? Not even to Sir?'

'I promise, Fan.'

She was his own old Fan once more. The face and eyes lighted up, and she turned and looked at him. In spite of tears and unnatural gravity, he read that she was pure, true, and good, as of yore.

'Did you really come home to look for me, all the way from America?' she asked.

'I did. And, in return, you must tell me why and with whom you left our home.'

'My very own father came to fetch me away, and I dared not refuse,' she replied, hesitating.

'Hurrah!' shouted Jack, enthusiastically. But, moderating his delight, he added, 'Go on, Fan. Why didn't you tell my father the truth?'

'It is a mystery, Jack. He would not let me tell, because he said it would bring trouble upon him. He is quite like a gentleman, yet he married my poor mother, Clorandy, when they were both

young. The Tigress knows all about it, for she is my grandmother.'

'You have a nice lot of relations,' said Jack, ruefully.

'Yes. But, you know, Jack, I was always a gipsy. I don't think my father is one by birth, though he has been mixed up with us.'

'Is he Wandering Will, Fan?'

'Hush! Nobody but you must know. He is and he isn't. He is somebody else as well. I thought he was, when I left home with him, and since he has turned into quite a nice person.'

'What was his name, when he became a "nice person," Fan? And where is he now?'

Fan evaded the first part of the question, answering the second.

'He left me on Whit-Monday, and has not returned since. Mrs. Lee—the Tigress, you know—found me out, and said

he would soon be back; but he hasn't come. Oh, Jack! I have been so miserable! Shut up in this stifling place, with nobody to speak to, and pining for Hoplands, and the common, and Sir. How is he? Was he very angry when I left?'

'Not angry, Fan; only sorry. How could you leave him?'

'Because of the Catechism, Jack; and my duty to my father, and the commandments.'

'But why did you not tell the truth to my father? He would not have prevented your doing your duty according to the Catechism.'

'Don't laugh, Jack. That is the mystery. He and the Tigress said I must choose between my real and my adopted father; my duty and my pleasure; poverty and riches; but I must not tell anyone with whom I went away. Oh! it was very hard; but the real father was so

poor and lonely that I thought I should be wicked, if I did not obey him.'

'Was it "honour your father and your mother"? Why, Fan, you are quite a paragon, and all for Wandering Will.'

Jack laughed merrily, and for the first time Fan showed her white teeth and dimples.

'There's a dear Fan! You look your own self once more. Now go and put on your bonnet and come home with me. When a man deserts his wife, she can have the law of him; and 'tis the same with a father. Yours has left you, and they will take you to the workhouse if he doesn't come back. I'll have a talk with the Tigress. I'll be bound she's outside.'

Jack did not wait for Fan's remonstrance, but went out on the landing, closing the door after him. Mrs. Lee was seated on the topmost stair, her basket beside her, industriously studying a primer, by means of

which she was learning to read. Jack sat down by her side, and spoke in a low tone.

'If I take Fan home with me, will you manage her father? Tell him whatever you like. I hear you are her grandmother, and why in the world haven't you said so all these years?'

'Before I was conwerted I went wrong. I thought only of her worldly good, and not of her duty. When my poor Clorandy died, I went off to the east, and lost sight of her and her father.'

'Pity you ever sighted 'em again, Mother Lee. But no good regretting. Will you manage Wandering Will, if that's her father, while I take her home? Pay up their rent, anything you like—tell him——'

'I have no time to lose, Mr. Jack,' interrupted the Tigress. 'Take her home, and I'll settle the rest. As I look into the

future, it is the best thing you can do. Tell her so. I have to meet Mr. Clarville at Mr. Aspenel's office, and may not tarry.'

But Fan suddenly opened the door.

'Come in,' she said. 'I dare not go unless my father bids me.'

'He bids you through me, Fan. He says you may go to the world's end with Mr. Jack Harton, and maybe he'll come with you. I have given up lying to speak the truth.'

As Mrs. Lee said this she went into the room, outspread her arms, and in them enfolded Fan. Poor Jack made a grimace; he was not quite reconciled to Fan's relations.

'Go with him,' said the old woman, imperatively; and Fan looked appealingly at Jack.

'What will Sir say?' she asked.

'That you were a very naughty girl to

run away, and a very good one to come back,' he replied, with a joyous ring in his voice.

'Your father shall know everything, and you will soon see him again,' added Mrs. Lee.

'Then I will go,' said Fan, her countenance changing to its natural gleaming brightness.

She went into an inner room, and Jack took the opportunity to give Mrs. Lee such money as he had, to pay for Fan's lodging.

'You needn't take any unnecessary trouble to hunt up your worthy son-in-law,' he said. 'We can manage Fan without him.'

'Do you hold to your word still?' she asked.

'To marry Fan? Of course I do, if she'll have me.'

The Tigress gave him a piercing glance,

held out her hand, and, as if by some old instinct, looked into the palm he gave in return.

'Honest!' she muttered. Then, letting it fall, added, 'Superstition again! The Lord forgive me.'

'Queer old fish!' he exclaimed, as she left the room. 'Shan't like her for a grandmother; but one's connections are of no moment in the far West.'

Fan returned with a little bundle in her hand, saying, humbly, that she hoped Jack would not be ashamed of her; for she had had no new clothes since she left Hoplands. Her dress was certainly shabby, but Jack was not ashamed of her. He took her bundle and hurried her downstairs, assuring her that Mother Lee had paid her landlady. They were not long in reaching London Bridge, and were on their way to Roselands in no time. Fan could scarcely breathe for excitement, and had not a

word to say in answer to Jack's questions, as they sat side by side in their third-class carriage.

'We would have gone first for grandeur, but I only saved enough for third,' laughed Jack, turning his empty pockets inside out.

'Oh, Jack! you're not a bit improved,' said Fan.

'But you are, Fan, for you used to stumble over the Commandments, and "I desire," in the Catechism, and now you know 'em all by heart.'

It was dusk when they reached Roselands, so Fan managed to elude observation, slipping past porter and ticket-collector and out into the road unnoticed.

'My heart will burst, I know it will,' she said, as they took a by-path to Hoplands. 'What is that?' she exclaimed, seeing for the first time in the dim light the bare rafters of the great house.

'There's been a fire at the Park. We're all in a muddle, for the squire's at Hoplands. But you'll soon hear all about it.'

'And the Miss Aspenels, and Nurse True?'

'They're all right. Come along, Fan. Tom's away, so there will be no one to lecture you.'

'Go in first,' pleaded agitated Fan, when they reached Hoplands.

'We'll go in together. Here she is, father!' cried exultant Jack, dragging her into the dining-room.

Fan stood for a moment, irresolute, in the middle of the room; but before Mr. Harton realised her presence she was assailed by three dogs, who leaped upon her, barking, wagging their tails, and displaying that canine joy and affection in which our four-footed friends so infinitely surpass us.

'Rolf, Bess, Fogey,' cried the girl, her arms round them all at once. Then bursting from them she cast those same arms round her benefactor with the words, 'Oh, Sir, dear Sir, Jack made me come home, and I am so glad, so glad!'

'Fan!' was all that Mr. Harton could say, as he embraced the wild girl whom he so dearly loved.

CHAPTER VI.

'HE IS MY FATHER!'

'I MUST see Fan!' said Loveridge to Jack. 'Bring her here directly.'

Jack had left his father, Fan, and the dogs together, a happy party, and had run upstairs to look after his patient. Miss Vigors had departed, and he found him alone.

'Why do you want to see Fan?' asked Jack.

'Bring her to me and you shall know. Fan and I are better acquainted than you fancy.'

Poor Jack! Where would Fan's friends come to an end?

He found her in her accustomed seat at his father's side, her hand in his, her now radiant face full of excitement, the dogs surrounding her.

'You must not ask me now, dear Sir,' she was saying; 'I will tell you everything soon.'

'Naughty Fan!' said Mr. Harton, caressingly; and at the name the dogs wagged their tails.

'Naughty Fan is wanted already. Come and show yourself,' interrupted Jack.

Fan rose obediently; she had always done what Jack bade her.

'You must moderate your instincts, Fan, for this is a hospital,' said Jack, mounting the stairs as quietly as he could. 'The squire is in the spare room, Loveridge in mine.'

'Who?' cried Fan, at the top of her voice.

'Hush, and you shall see.'

Fan dashed into the room, but halted at sight of Loveridge, still partially enveloped in cotton-wool; for, though his burns were gradually healing, they had not yet quite healed.

'Don't be afraid, Fan. It is I in so much of the flesh as the flames have left me. Our friend Jack must know all, for he is truer than steel.'

Fan hesitated as she approached him, and looked at Jack, who was close to her.

'What does it all mean?' she asked.

'I only know that his name is Loveridge, and that he saved Mr. Aspenel from the fire, and that they are both here, with nurses and doctors, *ad libitum*,' he whispered.

'He is my father,' murmured Fan.

She went, hesitatingly, towards Loveridge, and took his hand. Bewildered, Jack followed. He noticed that she was

quiet and subdued, and that there was none of the effusion in her greeting that there had been when she met his father. Her manner was rather that of protector than protected.

'I knew something must have happened to keep you so long away,' she said. 'Now you know all, Jack. It was with him—my father, who married my poor mother Clorandy—that I left Hoplands. Father, may I tell Sir?'

'Not yet, Fan; not until we go off to Canada together—Jack, and you, and I.'

'Oh! that would be beautiful!' cried Fan, clasping her hands, and looking inquiringly at Jack.

He was so astonished that he had nothing to say. Loveridge detailed to Fan the events of the fire, and told her that it was something Jack had said to the Tigress which induced him to send for her.

'He has nursed me so far, Fan; now you must do the rest,' he said. 'Has Mr. Clarville arrived? He promised to come here to-night.'

Almost as he spoke, Gerard entered. He had come by the last train. The Tigress had told him that Fan was found, and that she was the daughter of the man who had rescued Aspenel. He went at once to Fan and welcomed her home again; then he asked for an explanation.

'Under the seal of secrecy for the present,' returned Loveridge. 'Fan, you had better go back to Mr. Harton, and take Jack with you, or we shall all be suspected of conspiracy.'

Jack disliked the familiarity as much as the parentage, though he had been interested in Loveridge before. Fan felt this insensibly.

'I could not help it,' she said, pathetically. 'Let us go down to Sir.'

'A handsome couple, made for one another and the colonies,' said Loveridge, watching them from the room. 'Now, Mr. Clarville, when am I to see Aspenel?'

'Not until he has returned to the Park. He will not see you here, though he insists on a meeting before you leave the country. He says you are identical with the man who once tried to extort money from him, and that you have been the bane of his life, until at last you have saved it. Is it so?'

'Yes. He alone has the power to explain. I pray God that we may live to meet. I have been a wild, reckless fellow, while he has been heaping up gold. I have ruined myself, and have no excuse. I lived among the gipsies, and they called me Wandering Will. I married the beautiful Clorandy and left her, meaning to return. But when I came back from abroad she was dead, and the Tigress gone

off to the East. She alone knew about Fan, and I only learnt a short time ago that she was my daughter. I determined to turn over a new leaf, and began the *rôle* of Loveridge. Your words awakened my conscience, and your intervention between Aspenel and me saved me. Tell him that now I put myself entirely in his hands, and want nothing from him but reconciliation. As to the paltry money, I never cared for it when we were young, and now it would seem to me the wages of sin or intimidation.'

'Am I to tell him this?' interrupted Gerard.

'Yes. Tell him all you know of me and Fan; but not to-night.'

'Certainly not to-night,' said Gerard. 'I should not have come here but for your message through Mrs. Lee, and am warned by Mrs. Trueman and the doctor not to excite him.'

Gerard looked into the dining-room before he left Hoplands, and had the pleasure of seeing Mr. Harton, Fan, Jack, and the dogs surrounding the supper-table.

'Fan declares she means to relieve Jack by nursing that romantic hero, Loveridge,' cried Mr. Harton. 'Do you think she ought?'

'You should know best, but I daresay Jack will be glad of a substitute. Now I am going to spread the glad news that Fan has come back,' replied Gerard.

'Tell Mrs. Clarville and Miss Aspenel that I am not so bad as I seem,' said Fan, with a furtive look at Gerard which cleared when she read his kind face. 'Say I am so happy! Oh, so happy!'

When Gerard reached his mother's small abode, his first words were, 'Fan is found. She has come home!' while Mrs. Clarville and Edith said, almost simultaneously, 'Mrs. Aspenel is found. She is with Janet

in Paris.' These astounding revelations almost took the breath out of the trio. Edith's sweet, pale face gleamed with a joy that had not beautified it since the fire; and Gerard, looking at her, trembled lest it should soon be clouded. The close intimacy of the last days had intensified his love for her, and he sometimes hoped, or feared, as might be, that it was returned. But no word passed between them; they had matter of such moment to think of that all passing feeling not bearing upon it was repressed.

Janet had written to Edith, and communicated the events already detailed. She had never had a secret from her sister, and resolved to tell her all, whether Mrs. Aspenel and Tom Harton approved or not. She had told them she should do so, after their private interview, of the subject of which she knew nothing. They demurred, but Janet was resolute. Gerard at once

said she was quite right, and that the sooner they all returned the better, though secrecy would be needed for a time. He was sure Mr. Aspenel would be relieved of a terrible burden if his wife and son would come back, and that the doctors now advised his being moved to the habitable portion of his own house. Gerard transacted all his business, while Nurse True attended to him. He would see no one else, and their responsibilities were enormous. As to Gerard, he was quite worn out. He nearly lived on the railway; for the irritable invalid had no sooner got through one difficulty than another arose, and the fate of millions seemed to hang on the capacity and promptitude of this young man, who was the only one in whom Aspenel put implicit faith. Clerks and clients came to and from Hoplands, but Aspenel received them vicariously, and Gerard was the scapegoat. Strange

as it may seem, he could do no wrong. The millionaire trusted him who had refused to be enriched at his hands; him who chose love rather than gold, and despised the unrighteous mammon. The unforeseen grip of death clears the soul from darkness, and reveals the hidden mysteries of eternity.

Edith was well again, and only waiting permission to nurse her father. Miranda had vacated her small room, and, to satisfy Edith, Mrs. Clarville had allowed her to occupy it, while the maiden of the kitchen had managed as best she could. Under great emergencies, people overcome minor impediments; and this fire at the Park seemed to smooth all sorts of asperities. However, ten days or a fortnight of 'impediments' try the temper, and Gerard was doing his best, aided by workmen from all parts, to obey Mr. Aspenel's incessant order 'to have at least rooms pre-

pared for him, Edith, and Nurse True.' He also issued a command that the site of his study should be boarded up, and no one allowed to touch either ruined floor or burnt rafter until he could himself superintend it. He never seemed to realise the possibility of his own incapacity. But he was so reserved, that it was difficult to discover what he did or did not realise.

'I think it would be quite safe to go home at once,' said Edith, when the amazing news of the unexpected turning up of lost friends had been discussed, and Gerard was preparing to go to his dormitory at Mrs. Lucy's. 'I have been at the house all day, and dear Mrs. Clarville has found us helps for our time of need.'

'You!' remonstrated Gerard. 'We cannot afford to have you ill.'

'My maid has helped me, and we have turned the breakfast-room into a bed-room for papa, and I can occupy the morning-

room that opens into it. Fortunately, the front doors are uninjured; but papa will be best on the ground-floor; so said Dr. Roberts.'

'Mother, do you think she is equal to this?' asked Gerard.

'Certainly,' replied Mrs. Clarville, cheerfully. 'She will probably be all the better for larger rooms and her old surroundings.'

'You want to get rid of me. I do not wonder,' said Edith, with a voice between a smile and a tear. 'But I have been so peaceful with you that it has seemed like a new life for me, and, but for poor papa, I should have been very, very happy.'

Mrs. Clarville saw her son's eager glance, and knew what dangerous ground these, her dear ones, were treading; so, to avoid further complications, she hurried Gerard away.

But he was not permitted to go to No. 4, for Jack Harton was waiting for him.

'The squire won't rest till he has seen you,' he began. 'Unfortunately, he heard your voice and the unusual commotion of Fan's return—the dear girl can never be undemonstrative—and is sure something fresh has happened. That wonderful phenomenon, Mrs. True, says you had better come, if possible, and the respectable Loveridge, my future father-in-law, is of opinion that he had better be told all about Fan. What the squire and Fan can have to do with one another nobody knows; but there's no end to the mysteries.'

'There certainly is not,' said weary Gerard, retracing his steps towards Hoplands.

He found Mr. Aspenel much excited. Nurse True was afraid of fever, and consequent delirium.

'Clarville, why did you not come to me?' he began. 'There is something wrong. Has a vessel foundered, or a

bank broke, or a firm stopped payment, or am I ruined at last? What of the funds?'

'They are all right, sir. I came to see Loveridge.'

'Loveridge! What can he want with you now? When I move back to the Park, he must go there too. Tell him I insist upon it, or he shall not have the three hundred a-year. Tell Edith to prepare a room for him. I shall then be able to see him at leisure, and no one need be surprised, as he dragged me from the fire, and they will credit me with gratitude. Ha! ha! Aspenel grateful.'

Gerard saw that this was no time for new disclosures; still he thought it might be well to prepare his mind for coming events.

'Will there be room for Loveridge if Janet comes home? She is very anxious to see you. Then it is possible that

Mrs. Aspenel may hear of the fire and return unexpectedly,' said Gerard, cautiously.

'Mrs. Aspenel forsook me; Loveridge saved me. He must have the best, she the worst. All the ravens will come if they smell carrion afar off. What did you want with Loveridge?'

'To give him a message from old Mrs. Lee, the gipsy.'

'About his wife, or—or—lost child? The fool, to marry as he did. What of them?'

'The wife is dead. But the child is still alive.'

'Does he mean to heap her on my back as another burden?'

'I think not. He intends to take her to Canada with him.'

'Thank you. That will do. Tell him what I say, and that I am determined to return to the Park the day after to-mor-

row. I must have an interview with Harton before I leave, and thank him for his kindness. I, who never acknowledged a favour to mortal man, and owe everything to my own exertions, must eat humble-pie at last. As True says, "God is stronger than man." Good-night and thank you.'

CHAPTER VII.

BACK AT THE PARK.

Mr. Aspenel's orders and wishes were fulfilled to the letter. On the evening of the day he appointed he was conveyed to the Park. He chose the hour when he could best be concealed from view, and, accompanied by Gerard and Nurse True, was borne to his carriage on a mattress, placed in it, and removed to his half-dismantled house. He had previously had a short interview with Mr. Harton, which had tended to soften some of the prejudices of that good man's mind. They had not seen one another, for Aspenel insisted on a

darkened room to the last; and was so enveloped when carried downstairs that no portion of him was visible. He had, evidently, a nervous horror of being seen, and bade the doctors abstain from pronouncing on his case, either to himself or others. No one but they and Nurse True knew the amount of injury he had sustained, and she, fearing to trouble her dear Edith, was silent thereupon. She and Gerard managed everything between them, from the closed blinds of his carriage to the darkened windows of the breakfast-room to which he was conveyed.

Here Edith awaited him, but she did not venture to make her presence known to him until he was placed on the bed prepared for him, and signified to Nurse True his wish to see her. Gerard was by her side encouraging her. As soon as he had helped the afflicted father, his first thought had been for the trembling daughter.

They stood together a few moments alone, at one end of the large airy room. It had been hastily arranged as a sleeping apartment, and, but for the bed at the further end, looked much as it used to look when Edith partook of those dreary breakfasts, and arranged the papers, etc., when they were over.

'Bring Edith and leave us alone,' said Mr. Aspenel to Nurse True.

Hearing these words, Edith advanced and was received in Nurse True's motherly arms, as she passed towards her father.

'God help you, my darling,' prayed that good woman; and a similar petition rose from Gerard's heart, as they silently left the room.

'Your unworthy father,' were the words that greeted Edith when she reached the bed.

She knelt down and took the hand that lay on the coverlet. It was the left.

She kissed it, and her tears fell upon it.

'My dear papa,' was all she could say. Words come slowly at such times.

She could not see him, happily, for Nurse True had so arranged his bandages that they were hidden by curtains and semi-darkness.

'Only you, Nurse True, and Gerard Clarville will come near me until I express other wishes,' he said, in a strangely muffled voice.

'No, dear papa. Thank you for admitting me,' she replied, repressing her feelings.

'You have been a good daughter. Is the man who saved my life here?'

'Not yet. I understand he promises to come to-morrow. Bruce's study has been prepared for him.'

'Ah, Bruce! If you hear anything of him or—his mother—let them come home. Home, indeed! Oh, that awful fire! But

for—for the man Loveridge I should have been burnt to death. And you?'

'Mr. Gerard Clarville saved me, by the Divine guidance.'

'To what cause is the fire ascribed?'

'They say it originated in your study, dear papa.'

'My study. Ha! This unworthy hand. Was it Cranmer who thrust an "unworthy hand" into the flames?'

'Now we are together again, we will try to forget the flames, dear papa. They have haunted me, but they are gradually fading from my imagination.'

'They will never fade from mine. Your pious Nurse True says I must look beyond and above them, but while I feel them that is impossible.'

Edith felt how unequal she was to the task of combating horrors such as these, and remained silent.

'Have you nothing to say to comfort

me, or give me hope, or ease the terrors of my soul?' he asked, irritably. 'Do you know that ruin stares us in the face, and that I lost a fortune with this house? Do you know that I have worked my way up to fabulous wealth, only to be foiled by an element—by fire. It is preposterous.'

'God's ways are so mysterious,' hazarded Edith, in a voice nearly inaudible. 'Perhaps He may work good out of all this evil.'

Aspenel was silent, and Edith prayed for strength for the work before her. Suddenly her father began again about the flames, and she feared he was wandering in his mind.

'I think you had better try to rest after the exertion of coming here,' she said, quietly. 'I will send Nurse True and come again.'

He made no objection, and she left him. The doctor had just arrived, and went with

Nurse True to Aspenel, while she and Gerard were again, for a few minutes, alone. He saw how agitated she was, and sought to reassure her.

'Dr. Sant has taken upon himself to order a first-rate nurse from London to relieve Nurse True,' he said.

'He will not endure her presence, I am sure of that,' she replied. 'We must wait on him between us. Dear Mrs. Clarville offers to come, and I believe, if there is anyone whom he would consent to see, it is she. Besides, Mrs. Aspenel and Janet will be back, and perhaps he may see them. If there is any difficulty, Mr. Austen has placed the rectory at our disposal. I hinted to him that we might want additional rooms, and he offered them at once. Everyone is so kind; so kind!'

The repressed tears gave way, and rolled slowly down her cheek. She turned towards the open window near which they

were standing to conceal them; but, in spite of the gathering darkness, he felt that she wept. The night was still, save for the nightingale's song, which floated through the waves of air with a rich, mysterious rapture.

'My mother and I would do anything in the world to help you,' half-whispered Gerard.

'I know! I know!' returned Edith. 'You are our best and dearest friends. Do you—do the doctors—think he will die?'

This abrupt question was instantly partially answered by Dr. Sant himself, who joined them. Candles were brought in, and dispelled Edith's temporary depression.

'The move has been, as I feared, rather too much for him,' said the doctor. 'He is in great excitement. He will have no one near him but Mrs. Trueman and Miss

Aspenel, and the one is already knocked up—the other will soon be incapable.'

'I am stronger than you think,' said Edith, returning the inquiring glance reassuringly.

'My mother will help her, and I could sit up with him, if necessary,' added Gerard.

'I shall remain here to-night. Mrs. Trueman must have rest; and, if Mrs. Clarville were at hand, perhaps we might manage,' rejoined Dr. Sant.

Gerard said he would go and fetch his mother, and Edith was left alone with the doctor. She repeated her question as to whether her father must die, which was answered with the usual medical diplomacy. Quiet and freedom from excitement would do much, but it was difficult to allay the fever of the mind, etc., which, fortunately, left Edith in a state of uncertainty. However, she had not much time

for reflection. At Dr. Sant's request, she called Nurse True from her father's room, while he returned to it. She was horrified at seeing how ill and worn her dear old friend looked. She had been in attendance unaided for ten days and nights, and it was no wonder.

'You are to go to bed at once,' said Edith, with the gentle imperativeness she was wont to use with Nurse True when she wanted to help that good woman. 'Mrs. Clarville is coming, and she and I can manage between us, with Dr. Sant.'

'I will lie down awhile, my deary. I will dress and refresh myself, but I will not leave you to nurse poor Mr. Aspenel alone. I am not spent yet; when I am will be time enough to give in. God fits the nurse to the patient, as well as the back to the burden.'

This was all the concession Edith could obtain, and she gave Nurse True into the

care of her friend Rebecca, who was one of the helps found in the emergency. Mrs. Clarville arrived soon after, and Edith felt that she had the support she needed in her and Gerard. But the doctor gave Mr. Aspenel a sleeping-draught which took effect almost immediately, and Edith's first night of watching passed without disturbance. Mrs. Clarville was in the adjoining room, but was not required. All this was providential, since Nurse True slept all through the night without once awakening. Her distress of mind was great when she became aware of it in the morning; but she was comforted when she found her patient still asleep, and Edith curled up in an easy-chair at his side, also folded in sleep like a white dove. She left them thus, in order to see after the strangely disorganised household.

She found it better than she expected, for one or two of the old servants, who

were still out of place, had volunteered to return, 'to oblige Miss Aspenel,' and they had improvised a kitchen and other apartments in such part of the mansion as had remained intact. It was a bewildering scene, and everybody was running over everybody else; while workmen were swarming in all parts, repairing and making safe what seemed insecure, under orders from the master himself, given through Gerard. The sudden catastrophe aroused good feelings in the neighbourhood which had never existed before, and enemies became friends of him whom they had hated in times past.

'As matters seem more hopeful this morning I will go on to Hoplands,' said Dr. Sant to Mrs. Clarville. 'One must eat, and I would rather breakfast there than here. Keep him quiet, and let him sleep till doomsday if he will. I never had such an awful patient before, or saw

so devoted a nurse as that old True. Certainly we don't all get our deserts in this world. The man who saved this poor wreck of manhood is by far the best of the two.'

Dr. Sant found the party at Hoplands very cheerful, and greatly relieved by the absence of Aspenel. Still they inquired anxiously for him.

Fan was at her post at the breakfast-table, all fun and frolic, as of old: her slave, Mr. Harton, Jack, and the dogs were all waiting upon her. The doctor sat down gleefully amongst them, declaring that he had made a good choice between two stools, and would not be likely to fall to the ground.

'I mean to carry up his breakfast, Fan,' said Jack. 'He hasn't a bad appetite, considering, doctor. I don't mean in spite of the doctors, but considering his burns and blains. Two slices of bacon and two

eggs, Fan. What do you think of that, Dr. Sant?'

'Let him lay in as much as he can while he's here. Short commons over there, just at present,' replied the doctor, pointing in the direction of the Park.

After breakfast the doctor visited Loveridge, and while with him Gerard arrived with an imperative message from Aspenel. The trio consulted together.

'Mr. Aspenel insists on your coming at once to the Park,' said Gerard to Loveridge. 'As soon as he awoke he inquired for you, and bade me go and tell you that he could not rest until he had seen his deliverer. He was much excited. He ordered the carriage to be sent for you at eleven o'clock, and would not hear of a later hour.'

'You had better go,' said the doctor. 'He owes his life to you, and the best chance of prolonging it is by humouring

him in all things. I am glad he has some gratitude, poor wretch. Reports are abroad that his affairs are in confusion, and that he is not as rich as he was reported; but you know best, Mr. Clarville.'

'His mind is clear, and he only confides in me what is absolutely necessary,' replied Gerard, evasively, 'He requests me to go with you to the Park,' he added to Loveridge. 'One of the state drawing-rooms has been hastily prepared for you, and you will be near him.'

'I shall be grander in my latter end than my beginning,' laughed Loveridge. 'What shall I look like in a state drawing-room? I should like to see my benefactor first—I mean your friend, Mr. Harton; for you are all my benefactors.'

Gerard and Dr. Sant left and sent up Mr. Harton. He had not yet been apprised of the relationship between Fan and Loveridge. When the greetings were over,

and Harton was seated, he suddenly exclaimed,

'Surely I have seen you before? You are my old friend Wandering Will.'

'At your service,' replied Loveridge, who was never abashed by any kind of discovery. 'Whatever my other alias, I am always Wandering Will, and shall be to the end of the chapter. Before leaving your truly hospitable mansion, I want to thank you for more benefits than you know of. First, for taking me in when I was half dead, and bringing me to life again; secondly, for housing, clothing, and feeding my only child.'

His voice faltered, and he nearly gave way.

'Your only child! Not Fan?' said Harton.

'Yes, sir; Fan. Your son Jack will tell you all about it, for I cannot.'

Here the strange man fairly broke down.

Harton let him recover himself, and then asked, severely for him, why he had forsaken her.

'I—I—did not forsake her,' sobbed Loveridge. 'I did not know where she was. Her mother, my wife, Clorandy, must have left her at your gate, meaning to return. I was in foreign parts, and all I know is that she was taken suddenly ill and died, just as the van was moving from place to place. Whether she left the child of *malice prepense* will never be known; but you will receive my eternal gratitude for taking her in, and making of her the Fan she is. It was with me, her father, she left your house, and to me she has returned, at my request.

'And you mean to deprive me of her?'

'That shall be as you see fit. Wandering Will is nothing if not grateful. You have rescued my girl, and you only shall

dispose of her. I resign my right in her to you.'

Mr. Harton's severity relaxed.

'You and I were young men when you used to flit over the common like a will-o'-the-wisp,' he said. 'Now we are elderly, if not exactly old. How have you spent the interval?'

'It would take hours to tell you, and I must prepare for the most wonderful of all my adventures—a visit to Aspenel Park by invitation of its owner. Perhaps when that is over I may tell you more. Meanwhile I pray God to bless and reward you as I never can.'

Fan came in at this moment, and said Mr. Aspenel's carriage had arrived.

'And so, Fan, you have found your real father. I know all,' said Mr. Harton, kindly, but with a little choke in his voice.

'Yes, dear Sir. Is it not strange?' she

replied, looking down as if she had done wrong.

'You couldn't help it, Fan. Give me a kiss, and let us all be friends.'

Fan flung her arms round Mr. Harton; and poor Loveridge, looking on, shook his head, sighed, and repented.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CURIOUS MEDLEY.

'I WILL see him alone first; then you and Gerard Clarville will come when summoned,' said Mr. Aspenel to Edith.

A few moments after the door closed on Loveridge, and he stood hesitating in the semi-darkness of the obscure and curtained room.

'Is it you, Will?' came from the bed.

'It is I, Henry,' from the trembling Loveridge.

'Come here,' moaned Aspenel; and the other went.

Silence ensued.

'You have saved my life. Can you forgive me?' at last from Aspenel.

'Yes. Can you forgive me?' from Loveridge.

The left hand moved uneasily on the counterpane, and Loveridge took it and sat down. Another silence longer than the first. At last Loveridge spoke.

'Then we are friends. I want no money, Henry.'

A groan from the bed was the reply.

'All the old love came back when you were in danger; all the greed and anger vanished. I remembered our mother. She has been with me ever since.'

'Our mother!' with another groan from the bed.

'She loved us both. She forgave you, Harry.'

'She could not. What did she say?'

'She said, "It is not Harry, it is mammon: it is the devil. He was a good lad."'

'Mother was right. I sold myself to the devil for gold. Purified as by fire—by fire—says Nurse True. Can the burnings of the body save the soul?'

'If they can't, Christ can; so preaches and prays Gerard Clarville. But are you so very bad, Harry?'

Aspenel groaned again, but did not answer.

Tears were rolling down Loveridge's cheeks. His voice was strangely pathetic when he spoke next.

'We have both been great sinners, and wasted our lives; you in hoarding, I in squandering. You have been too ambitious, I too grovelling. We have both left our proper sphere; you to rise higher, I to sink lower. We have forgotten the Lord that bought us.'

'You turned preacher!' muttered Aspenel.

'Not preacher, but penitent. Let us

begin again. Let us lead new lives.'

'Too late! too late!'

Aspenel spoke those words, as so many have done, in an agony of remorse, and Loveridge had no words of comfort ready; so there was silence again.

'Perhaps if our father had been different we might have been different,' spoke Loveridge at last, wishing to make excuses for Aspenel, if not for himself.

'Then my sins must be visited on my boy,' groaned Aspenel.

'Not if you give him good guardians and teachers.'

'But I know not what has become of him. All hope is taken from me. I am wrecked body and soul—wrecked and ruined. Do you know that the mines are shut up, and—and——'

Here a tremor shook the bed, and Loveridge found that the grip of the old enemy was on him still.

'What matters?' he said. 'We must leave it all behind us. I have nothing to leave. Yes—I forgot I have my child. Clorandy is dead, but my child lives.'

'Your child? What of her?'

'I cannot tell you now. But you have also children, and must struggle up again for their sakes and your wife's.'

'Maimed—disfigured—ruined! Never! Never!'

'Oh! don't say that!' cried Loveridge, affecting cheerfulness. 'We are friends, and I mean never to offend you again. I am going off to Canada, and, you know, "'Tis distance lends enchantment to the view," so we shall learn to admire and love one another, and I shall be out of the way. I'm heartily sorry for all the threats I've used to extort money from you, and be you sure I will never repeat them. But you held a tight rein, Harry.'

'I did. It was pride as well avarice. I

could not bear to see your degradation. I, who was—But what am I now? All but a charred and mutilated corpse.'

'My dear Harry, your mind is wandering. What can I do for you?'

Loveridge rose and tried to look through the closed curtains upon the form within. But nothing was visible. He could bear the strain of the broken conversation no longer, and asked in a constrained, anxious voice whether Aspenel really wished to see his daughter and Clarville.

'Yes, call them in,' he replied.

Loveridge had left them in the adjoining room, and, opening the door which communicated with it, saw that they were there still. He beckoned them in. They were scarcely seated—Edith on the side of the bed opposite Loveridge, Gerard at its foot—when Aspenel said, in a hollow voice, and dragging out the words one by one,

'This man—Loveridge—who has risked

his life to save mine—is—my—brother!'

He did not see the astonished start of the trio; for Loveridge was as much surprised by the sudden disclosure as the others by its strangeness. Still, he felt it; for he added,

'You are amazed. No wonder. William, tell them our history. All—all. They, and they alone, must know the whole. Conceal nothing.'

'There is not much to tell,' began Loveridge, in a nervous, constrained way. 'Our father was a goldsmith, who made his own fortune. His name was Brand. Our mother was a good woman, who was once his housekeeper. They gave us a first-class education. We were sent to schools and colleges enough for a dozen young goldsmiths. I was intended for the church; my brother, the eldest, for merchandise. I was always a scapegrace; he had a genius for business, like my father. I soon de-

clared that I would not take orders, and offended my father. When he died he left the business to my brother, and a certain portion to me, provided I turned over a new leaf. He was an odd man, and left our mother to our joint care, not providing specially for her.'

Here Aspenel groaned.

'Harry turned the business to good account, and grew richer and richer and richer. He changed his name to Aspenel. I did not reform, and grew poorer and poorer and poorer, and changed my name to Loveridge, an old gipsy name, as good as Aspenel for that much. He stuck to his merchandise, and rose; I to my gipsying, and sank. As long as our mother lived, I strove to maintain her; when she died, I became Wild Will, Wandering Will, and all sorts of characters.'

'I let our mother starve,' groaned Aspenel.

'You offered to maintain her if she would leave me and live in retirement; but she declined. You said you would abide by the terms of the will and give me a share of the business if I reformed, and I declined. We kept one another *in terrorem*. I extracted money from you by threatening to disclose your origin, name, history, and our brotherhood; and you kept me silent by declaring that if I did so I should never have another penny. It was tit-for-tat.'

'I was hard, cruel, relentless,' broke in Aspenel.

'I was reckless, selfish, obstinate,' continued Loveridge. 'We tried to hate one another, and succeeded but too well. Yet we loved one another when we were little children and went hand in hand. How is that, Gerard Clarville? A mystery—a mystery—like life and death. Yea, verily, it was death that opened up the springs of

life. But for that fire, I might have been a Cain. God only knows, for I have been fearfully malignant. But for you, Gerard Clarville, I had perhaps been a murderer.'

'And I!' came with anguish from the bed. 'Go on—finish quickly.'

'After mother's death I went off and wandered all over the world, returning from time to time to extract money from one who willed to keep it. I married a gipsy, and he knew it, and it angered him more and more. We were married in church, so he had nothing to say on that head. Forgive me, Harry; I am forgetting your presence. There is no more to tell that I know of, except that, having found my daughter, I was beginning to be respectable, and had some claim on the portion promised to the reformed prodigal. This was being negotiated by you, Mr. Clarville; but we both stood out as to the sum required. Now dread of death has

conquered us both. He will give everything; I will take nothing. I have my child. We will begin life together.'

'Who is your child?' murmured Aspenel.

'Fan.'

At this name Edith rose with an involuntary exclamation, checked, however, by her father.

'Fan! I knew it, for she has crossed my path,' he said. 'You also now know all, Gerard and Edith. Listen and decide. I must have some one to manage for me, bound to me by strong ties; some one who can be secret as well as faithful. You have both worked for me without greed. Will you continue to do so? I constitute you my stewards, and give my consent to your marriage.'

At this wonderful and unexpected announcement, Edith, humbled and dismayed, left the room. What did her father mean?

Word of love had never passed between her and Gerard.

'I shall never be able to speak to him again,' she thought, as, unperceived by all but him, she glided away.

'You misunderstand, sir,' began Gerard, in undisguised agitation. 'You have imagined what has never occurred. Miss Aspenel and I are—are—only friends. I will do all I can for you, but she must not be trammelled.'

'You saved her life,' murmured Aspenel. 'You must now avert my ruin. I have no faith in anyone but you. Call Edith —call Nurse True. I think I am dying. Send for Mr. Austen; bring back my wife and son. Let Janet come. I must make peace—peace.'

Gerard had witnessed one or two similar outbreaks of remorse and fear, and signed to Loveridge to withdraw, whispering him to send the nurse. She came, and between

them they soothed the patient. Edith crept back, and Gerard immediately withdrew. Here was a complication as perplexing as those which had preceded it. He went with Loveridge—as we must still call him—to the sumptuous drawing-room prepared for his reception. Here Loveridge's natural manner returned. He shook Gerard heartily by the hand, exclaiming,

'The murder's out, and you know all. If we were but shrewd enough to understand, we should acknowledge that all the world's akin. Millionaires and outcasts—fine ladies and gipsies—pietists and penitents, here we are all jumbled together in this fine house, and all related or about to be. You will be my nephew, and Fan your cousin by marriage, while——' He paused; then added, 'I suppose you don't mean to refuse the fortune thrust upon you? I know you are a dreamer, and

above the lust of riches; but here is an opportunity of serving your fellow-creatures which even you dare not lose. Still, never marry for money, or for anything but a love likely to last. I married for a passionate admiration of beauty, and I soon tired of my poor Clorandy and left her. She was Fan without Fan's education, and I was, if a scamp, at least a sort of a gentleman. But you and Miss Aspenel——'

'Hush!' broke in Gerard. 'If you have any love for me, as you say you have, you will keep that scene secret and sacred as long as you live. You saw her leave the room at the strange proposal made by her father, and I felt as if I should shrink into nothing. His mind was wandering, and he will not remember what he said to-morrow. But your strange tale we shall never forget. What remains for us to do is to keep your poor brother's resolu-

tion alive, so that he may do you tardy justice.'

'I want none of his money,' interrupted Loveridge.

'But a portion of it is your due, if you begin a new life. And you have Fan to think of. Fan! That is the strangest episode of all. And Jack! Unselfish, true-hearted Jack.'

'It is a curious medley, Mr. Gerard, and all its complications due, more or less, to my poor brother, God help him. I hope you pray for him as you did for me.'

'I have prayed for him long, and so have others. But I have work to do for him. I must be off to town on his business, for, now that he is back in his own house, he means to have his lawyers down to make a new will, as I understand him. His brain is over-active, and the doctors say he will

go out of his mind if he is not humoured. His sufferings are still awful.'

'Perhaps I should have done better to let him alone,' said Loveridge, reflectively.

'And lose his soul!' added Gerard, with unusual austerity.

'Ah! I forgot that portion of our complex being. I always have ignored it, but I mean to redeem the past. Thank you, Gerard Clarville, for helping me.'

They shook hands again, and Gerard hastened away. He was soon replaced by Edith. She came in looking very white and terrified. She had watched Gerard leave the house first.

'Papa is better,' she began. 'He wishes you to know that he was not really dying. I cannot quite understand what has just passed. It took me by surprise. Will you kindly explain? Are you really my

father's brother? Is Fan my—my—cousin?'

She trembled perceptibly, and Loveridge placed a chair for her. He could not quite realise that the fair, refined girl before him was so nearly related to him and his wild, impetuous child. He recapitulated calmly what he had said in her father's sick-room, with such additions as he thought might interest her. His manners became those of a gentleman, and she gradually perceived the results of early education not quite eradicted by a wild life.

'Your father and I once loved one another,' he said, pathetically, when he had concluded his narrative.

'That I understand. You could not have risked your life to save his, had you not loved him,' she returned; and she thought, simultaneously, of how Gerard had saved hers.

But with the thought came a grave

regret for what her father had so lately proposed. She put it aside, however, and continued to question her newly-found uncle. She asked if she had any other relations on her father's side, and he replied, with an amused smile, that he knew of none. He said their early history, if they ever had one, had been long blotted out of all heraldic books, and had recommenced under the name of Aspenel. Then he enlarged upon Gerard's tact and kindness, until she fancied he referred to her father's late disclosure, and she nervously turned the conversation upon Fan. She said that everybody liked Fan, particularly Janet, who would be glad of the kinship. She could not say, truthfully, that she herself rejoiced at it; and this the shrewd Loveridge was not slow to perceive.

'Do you think she would like to come here?' she asked.

'Certainly not,' he replied. 'One inter-

loper is enough, and I am made that unwelcome spectre by King Circumstance. You see, having been a strolling player in my time, I became poetical, and no sooner do I resolve to be reformed than I think of publishing my poems.'

Loveridge was about to begin a rhodomontade, with a view to clearing off the clouds on her fair brow—so he put it to himself—when Nurse True came in to say Mr. Aspenel particularly wanted to see him, and, with a studied and somewhat theatrical bow and smile, he left Edith to her very troubled meditations.

CHAPTER IX.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

There was life at the Park once more. No sooner was its owner back than affairs began to resume their old aspect. The country was scoured for workmen to expedite the repairs, and for servants to fill such places as were still habitable. Mr. Aspenel appeared suddenly to have lost sight of economy, and to be running into almost unnecessary extravagance.

On the third day after his return, Mrs. Aspenel, Janet, and Bruce arrived, *chaperoned* by their *cavaliere servente*, Tom Harton. They had been made acquainted

with events as they had happened, so, when the carriage met them at the station, they had all to see, but not much to learn. Mrs. Aspenel's heart sank as she espied the blackened rafters and roofless turrets of the grand house of which she had formerly been mistress, and excitable Janet was ready to jump from the carriage in dismay. Tom Harton soothed them by the trite assurance that it might have been much worse, and, when they dropped him at the point nearest Hoplands, he pressed their hands expressively, and hoped they would also find Mr. Aspenel better than they expected.

'Does he hope it?' asked Janet of herself.

'I'm glad he's gone. Oh, mammy, isn't it horrid?' cried Bruce.

'It is horrid, Bruce,' replied Mrs. Aspenel, while slow tears rolled down her cheeks, and she thought of the day when

she left the Park of her own free will, meaning never to return.

The day was hot, close, and misty, and the travellers felt a strange depression in the atmosphere, which re-acted upon them, even upon Bruce, who exclaimed, again and again,

'Isn't it horrid? Has the fire frightened away the birds? Where is the sun? It is as hot as it was in Paris.'

When they approached the house, however, they were re-assured by its unchanged frontage, and, when Edith and Nurse True met them in the hall, it seemed as if nothing could have happened. But, as Mrs. Aspenel stood a moment aside to watch the embraces of the others, she felt as if her return were truly a penance for her sins. It was but for a moment, for Edith's loving heart soon turned to her, and her words, 'Oh, I am so glad you have come home,' brought tears to her eyes. Nurse

True's greeting also showed earnest joy, and Bruce's delighted caperings from one to the other proved that she alone had rejoiced in her temporary absence.

'How is he—how is Mr. Aspenel?' she asked, with an emotion she had never thought to experience.

'Better, ma'am, I hope,' replied Nurse True. 'He has passed a better night.'

'And he is very anxious to see you,' whispered Edith.

They went into the drawing-room which Loveridge had vacated. He had prevailed on Jack to get him an invitation to Hoplands for that night, at least; for he had tact enough to feel that his presence must be unwelcome at such a time. Accordingly, this one state apartment was much as Mrs. Aspenel had left it. When she went upstairs, however, she, as well as Janet and Bruce, became aware of the inroads the fire had made. All the old rooms

were destroyed, and such as remained intact were the ones formerly appropriated to guests. When she reached the one prepared for her, Edith alone was with her.

'Edith! I can never see him. Now I have come back, I am more terrified than ever,' she said, sinking into an easy-chair and covering her face.

'He is very quiet. You will not mind, dear,' said Edith, laying her hand caressingly on her shoulder.

Mrs. Aspenel took and held it.

'How thin you are! How wasted!' she exclaimed, thinking for the first time of the fragile girl who had been obliged to bear everybody's burden as well as her own.

She turned to look at her and was shocked at her appearance. The white dove was whiter than ever. She drew her towards her, and the poor child gave way

to much suppressed feeling in her step-mother's arms.

'What love I have wasted! How selfish I have been!' murmured Mrs. Aspenel. 'You shall help me to be better for the future.'

'We will all help one another!' sobbed Edith.

By degrees they grew calm, and talked over the events that had succeeded each other rapidly since they parted; Janet joined them, asking when she might see her father. She was succeeded by Bruce, whose exuberant spirits had to be checked by Edith; for Nurse True had been recalled to her patient. She followed, however, almost on the footsteps of the boy, with a message from her master, to the effect that he would like to see Mrs. Aspenel as soon as she was rested.

Rested! She had had no rest for many a long day.

'May we all go, nurse?' she asked, nervously.

'Master wishes to see you alone, ma'am,' replied pitiful True.

Mrs. Aspenel took off her bonnet at once, and followed to her husband's apartment, once her own delightful morning-room.

'You will come in with me,' she said, appealingly.

'I will go in first, ma'am; but, perhaps——'

'Of course—of course we must be alone.'

'Master is still in a darkened room. You will not really see one another, and you had better not speak of his appearance. Indeed, he is still covered with plaister and linen; you cannot, and must not, touch him. Only the left hand.'

True unclosed the door gently, and preceded Mrs. Aspenel to the bedside.

'Here is mistress, sir,' she said.

'Let her come—let her come,' he answered.

Mrs. Aspenel went, trembling all over. She took the inevitable seat and the hand always lying on the counterpane. She could not speak, for words would not come. He spoke first.

'You have come home. Why did you go away?' he said, irritably; and she was thankful for so natural an opening.

'I—I—scarcely know. But I am sorry that I left you,' she returned, as unaffectedly as she could.

'I didn't mean to hurt you; but you were so provoking,' he said, with an injured tone that set her quite at her ease.

'I know that I am, but if you will forgive me I will try to be a better wife in the future than I have been in the past,' she returned, forcing down some rebellious feelings that strove to give the lie to her words.

'Thank you. But you don't know what you promise. It will be for "worse," and not for "better." Ruin and desperate suffering if I live; and if I die——' he shuddered.

'Forgive my past, and I will undertake your future,' she said, with a sympathy so real that she felt him press her hand, and almost thought she loved him.

After a pause he began to speak excitedly.

'It is that cursed gold—those awful flames—these fearful burnings. You cannot undertake these,' he groaned. 'Fetch the doctor—send Nurse True. Let me see Janet and Bruce, for now I must be dying.'

She did not know that this was his terrified cry at every fresh excitement; and, frightened herself past restraint, she hastened to the door.

'Stay! stay!' he cried. 'We must finish before anyone else comes. I am better.

It was a passing agony and fear. You don't know what it is to be in dread of death, and, worse still, the after-death which must come—must come. It is awful. But I repent, and they tell me—Nurse True and Gerard and Austen—that it is never too late to repent. They all say the same; even my poor brother. Never too late. What do you think?'

'Never,' groaned Mrs. Aspenel, not knowing what she said.

'Cannot you say something to comfort me? You have said plenty to annoy me,' he asked, irritably.

'I cannot find words. I will try to act better,' she replied, humbly. 'I am very, very sorry for your sufferings, and all you have gone through.'

'If you hadn't left me, it wouldn't have happened. I believed you had robbed me, and was counting—counting—always counting—to find out. All of a sudden I

was surrounded by flames. I don't know how they began, but they say it was in my own room. I lost my head. I tried to save my gold, so hardly won—so hardly won. I tried to close the safe; I couldn't. I know no more. They will tell you about my rescue.'

'I know it all,' put in the agitated wife.

'But do you acknowledge that it was your fault?'

'I know I ought not to have left you, but you should not have suspected me; I never robbed you.'

She felt that the old spirit was returning, and tried to crush it. But to be accused of originating the fire seemed beyond endurance.

'Never mind that. You married me for my gold—my gold! All melted. Clarville is to see after it in a day or two. You must go with him. It was an iron fireproof safe, and perhaps some may be left.

Do you think me a miser? Not quite. I have given sometimes, and I paid all your debts though I swore I wouldn't; and Bruce's schooling, though Harton cheated me. Did you correspond with Tom Harton?'

This sudden question startled Mrs. Aspenel, and gave her the chance of turning the current of his fearful wanderings. She assured him that she had written to no one since she left the Park.

'He would have known where to find us had I been in communication with him,' she said.

'You needn't have gone away at all,' he repeated; and she discovered that this was the grievance.

Both were silent for a time, and perplexing thoughts harassed her almost more than his words. Her past life rose before her in amazing swiftness. Yes; she knew that she had married him for his gold;

that she had neglected his children; that she had been ambitious, selfish, aggravating; that she had left him because she hated him; and that she had never sought to win him to herself by even the semblance of affection. Such marriages are awful mockeries, and she acknowledged the sin of hers. She did not even seek to palliate it; for she believed the Divine vengeance had fallen upon them both. There, however, by his side, in the solemn silence and semi-darkness of the sick-chamber, she vowed to be a better wife, and, if he were spared, to atone in some degree for her past. But what of him? She shuddered as she asked herself this question. He partly answered it.

'You will be sorry you came back, for I shall be always here, if I get about again. You will never get rid of me. I mean Edith to marry Gerard Clarville, and Bruce to go to school; and Janet—I

haven't made up my mind about her; but you will be obliged to be content with me.'

'Why will you talk so strangely? Of course I shall,' she returned, striving to be natural, but feeling very uncomfortable.

'You are pretty sure to run away again, for I shall never be able to face the world as I now am. Perhaps I had better see the children. Send them both together. See them, indeed! Poor blind, maimed wretch that I am. Let me get it over at once.'

His irritation seemed to increase, and she rose.

'I may come again?' she said, gently.

'Just as you like,' he replied.

Nurse True was in the next room, and she went to her master, while Mrs. Aspenel summoned Janet and Bruce. They had been having some refreshment and were prepared to go to their father. Even Bruce

was struck by the extreme pain of his mother's face, and exclaimed,

'What is the matter, mammy? I am frightened to go.'

He went, nevertheless, hand-in-hand with Janet, leaving Mrs. Aspenel and Edith together. They talked over what had passed since they parted, until Mrs. Aspenel grew calm, and Janet and Bruce returned. Poor Janet was weeping and trembling, and, as to Bruce, he was terribly frightened, and said, as he clung to his mother,

'I don't believe it is father at all. I peeped through the curtains and saw nothing but bed-clothes, and a head all covered with white. I think it was a ghost.'

'He was very kind,' sobbed Janet; 'and I am ashamed of having been so undutiful and wicked a daughter. What if he had died, and I had never seen him again?

Edith is the only one who has not to reproach herself.'

It was truly a melancholy home-coming for all, and but for Bruce they would have been most miserable. His irrepressible spirits roused them, and by degrees they accustomed themselves to the inevitable. Mrs. Clarville came, and her presence always brought comfort. Janet asked for Gerard, and, to her surprise, Edith left the room, while Mrs. Aspenel connected her disappearance in some way with what her husband had said. She had not ventured to allude to it to Edith, knowing how sensitive she was. In truth, the poor girl had avoided Gerard since her father's painful revelation, and the distance between them seemed more impassable than ever.

CHAPTER X.

RESTITUTION.

'It is altogether past my comprehension, Miss Janet. I am not a novel-reader, or I might understand the romance of it,' said Mr. Harton, senior, a day or two after the return of the wanderers. 'By "a marvellous concatenation," as the penny-a-liners say, we are likely to become connected all round. If Jack marries Fan, Jack and you will be a sort of cousins, but what relation shall I be?'

'A paternal cousin, of course,' laughed Janet, who was recovering her spirits, and had come to see her new relatives. 'Where is Fan?'

The question was answered by that damsel bursting into the room, followed by Jack and the dogs. She drew back when she saw Janet, and hung her head as if suddenly abashed. She did not advance to meet her, but retreated towards Jack, as if for protection.

'What is the matter, Fan?' exclaimed Janet, rising, and going towards her.

'Oh, Miss Janet!' was all the unconventional girl could articulate.

'Dear Fan, we are real cousins now, and I am come to welcome you as my very own relation,' cried Janet, first getting hold of her hand, and then striving to kiss her.

'And don't you really mind? Isn't Mrs. Aspenel ashamed of me?' exclaimed Fan, still irresolute.

'Why, Fan, you know I love you,' said Janet, half offended.

'How kind, how good! and me, a born

gipsy!' returned Fan, casting her arms round Janet in a sort of rapturous embrace.

She held her so long and close, while tears streamed from her eyes, that at last Jack cried out,

'Fan, you know it will be murder out-and-out if you stifle Miss Janet.'

'And then you'll never marry Jack and go to Canada,' added Mr. Harton, who was much moved by the little scene.

So were the dogs, who began to bark and jump as they were wont at Fan's vagaries.

'Are you sure you don't mind?' asked Fan, releasing her prisoner. 'It won't matter so much when I'm out of the way. I wish I weren't a born gipsy, though now I'm only half-and-half, Jack says.'

'Whatever you are, Fan, we are first cousins, and I am come to congratulate

you, and make acquaintance with your father, my—my uncle, you know, and Edith says he is very nice.'

'Does she? Does Miss Aspenel really acknowledge us?' interrupted Fan, standing in a dramatic attitude with her hands clasped and her eyes fixed on Janet. 'I am afraid of Miss Aspenel, because she is so fair and pure; so different to us.'

'You must come and see her, Fan. You would love her, if you knew her better. You know, she is not like me, full of all sorts of impulses, as Madame says, but always gentle and good. I am more like you, and that is why I am so fond of you.'

'Dear Miss Janet! Oh, Sir, isn't she beautiful!' cried Fan, ecstatically.

'Because she is like you?' laughed Mr. Harton. 'Most vain Fan! Still I am bound to endorse your opinion of Miss Janet,' he added, bowing to the really

lovely girl, who had come among them so kindly.

He did not proclaim what was in his mind, that she certainly was one of the handsomest girls he had ever seen. Janet smiled, and made a graceful little bend in return. She had already learnt to take compliments for what they were worth. She had seated herself in a high-backed chair of carved mahogany, and Fan sat down beside her, and took her hand.

'I should like to see your father,' she whispered.

Jack overheard, and disappeared in search.

A confidential discourse ensued, such as happens between two girls when one is engaged to be married. Mr. Harton joined in it, and clenched what they said by reasonable explanations.

'You see, Miss Janet,' he volunteered, 'all they have to do now is to marry.'

'Let me be bridesmaid,' broke in Janet.

'They have a fine prospect in Canada,' he continued. 'They are really "to the manner born," and Fan's father is at least "to the manner bred"; so they will go out under good auspices. I am to be left to the tender mercies of Tom and the ladies, for they don't care about me.'

'Oh, Sir,' cried Fan, leaving Janet's side and going to Mr. Harton, 'if only you would come too! But he has promised to go and see Jack's wigwam. He says it is very comfortable.'

'I understand that Mr. Aspenel wishes to see me, and perhaps we may make it more comfortable still between us,' pursued Harton. 'Your father thinks a deal too much of my enforced hospitality. As to Loveridge, I can't get rid of him, can I, Fan?'

Loveridge and Jack came in at the moment. Fan ran towards them, took the

former by the hand, and led him to Janet.

'My father,' she said, with a strange hesitation.

Was she ashamed of him, after all?

Janet rose, and they shook hands. It was an uncomfortable introduction, to say the least of it, and the usually confident man stood abashed before the queenly maiden. She was pleasantly surprised at his appearance. He was good-looking, despite a few plaisters which still disfigured his face, and, when his momentary shyness passed off, she found him well-mannered. Could this be the Wandering Will of whom she had heard so much?

'You saved my father's life.' she said, after a pause. 'We must always be grateful to you, even if you were not a—a near relation.'

'That has been forgotten so long that it had better still remain in oblivion,' he said, nonchalantly, seeing her hesitation.

'I have Fan and Jack. I want no others, though my benefactor, Mr. Harton, condescends to admit me as a future connection. You see, my dear lady, "all the world's akin," and this universal relationship suffices for me. Your father and I are brothers by consanguinity, but that does not necessitate further approximation. Excuse the long word. Hard words are bad taste, both in conversation and literature. My friend Jack is a brother of the accomplished student in the neighbouring room; but that literate and your humble servant will not be united by the marriage of our relations. We dislike one another, and my kith-and-kin are those with whom I have perfect sympathy, or affinity, as people call it. You perceive I know all the fashionable slang, just as well as if I had been an inmate of Aspenel Park.'

Janet listened amazed to this rhapsody.

She had heard of the powers of Wandering Will, but little understood the sort of man he was.

'Isn't he clever!' said Fan to Jack.

'He's queer,' returned Jack, annoyed.

'So I am, Jack,' laughed Loveridge, who still inclined to retain that name, rather than to resume Brand.

'I am so queer, Miss Aspenel, that you need never fear my introducing myself as that near relation you mentioned. I should no more presume to consider you and that "sweet, pale Margaret" of a sister of yours as my nieces, than I should the royal princesses. The secret shall die with the few who know it.'

'But we are your nieces, and do not wish to disavow it,' said Janet, recovering her natural manner; 'I am delighted to have Fan for a cousin, and I think you and I would soon get on very well. I like clever people.'

A hearty laugh from Mr. Harton, in which Jack joined, followed this advance to friendship.

'When I am quite reformed,' he said, with a somewhat theatrical bow to Janet, 'I will acknowledge you as my niece, with that pride which virtue assumes when conscious of superiority; until then we continue very distant relations.'

'My father is your only brother,' pleaded Janet.

'Yes; I disgraced him, and he disavowed me. I will never disgrace his children lest they also send me to Coventry. Will you kindly tell your father that I will be with him this evening?'

Janet rose to go, and they shook hands again. This time their eyes met, and there was an interchange of that sympathy of which he had spoken.

'You are like our mother,' he said, gravely; 'she was the loveliest and

best mother that graceless sons ever had.'

His voice faltered, and that one touch of genuine feeling drew the hearts of all those who surrounded him towards him. Janet said, cordially, that she hoped to see him again that evening, and to introduce him to Mrs. Aspenel. He shook his head, and assured her that he could not come near so 'bright and particular a star.'

Fan went with her to the gate. Her sparkling face was overclouded, for she feared what effect the introduction might have on Janet.

'He isn't like Sir,' she said, humbly; 'but I couldn't help his being my father.'

'Nor I his being my father's brother,' returned Janet. 'We must make the best of our relations, Fan; and hold our tongues about their history. I am afraid it is not very creditable, but the end may

be better than the beginning. If papa recovers, I don't mind.'

'Not if you marry a lord? What will he say?' asked Fan.

'I have made up my mind never to marry,' said Janet, with a decision that Fan did not understand. 'Single people are the happiest, and can pursue art, or good works, or a hundred pleasant things that would be impossible if they had children.'

'Oh, Miss Janet! Think of the old ladies!'

'I do, Fan, and consider them the very nicest and most unobjectionable people I know. Why, they haven't a care in the world, and here are we, with all our riches, as miserable as can be.'

'I couldn't live without Jack,' said Fan, meditatively; 'but then I'm a born gipsy, and think a log-hut must be like a palace.'

Janet laughed, and went off in high spirits, meditating on other people's prospects. But the spirits were soon depressed, for nothing could exceed the gloom of the Park. Even Bruce was oppressed by it.

Loveridge came in the evening to see his brother. He had made Fan the excuse for his temporary absence, but Mr. Aspenel reproached him for it. He was decidedly better, and the doctors thought his mind was relieved of some weight that might conduce to his recovery. Although he scarcely allowed it, the return of his wife and boy was the cause of the amendment. Nature was recovering some of her rights, and, as Nurse True said, 'He has his feelings, like the rest of us.' They displayed themselves to his brother in a way quite unexpected. He declared his intention of making amends for the past, and giving him the portion promised him by their

father on his reformation. He knew to a fraction what it would have been. His memory was like a ledger. He said it was mere restitution, and not return for saving his life, or silence-money for concealing the past.

'You don't know that I'm reformed,' said Loveridge, who misdoubted this act of justice.

'Gerard Clarville says you are, and I believe him,' was the reply. 'He is the only man who never told me a lie; never cringed for my money; sacrificed himself for his mother's sake—(Oh! Will, if I had done the same!)—did good works without ostentation; practises what he preaches; withstands the temptation of riches, and even yields love to duty. How different to us, who have merely followed our bent to the ruin of our souls.'

'Why, Harry, I verily believe you are "conwerted," as the Tigress, my respect-

able mother-in-law, says,' interrupted Loveridge, who felt uncomfortable at this unusual speech, and tried to turn its current.

'I wish I were! I wish I were! All hope of this world has departed, and, but for Nurse True and Clarville, I should leave it with all my sins upon me. They bid me cast off the burden, and lay it . . . but, well, I cannot, I dare not.'

These two brothers, miser and spendthrift, sat long silent. Solemn thoughts came to each—thoughts that neither could express, but which were, doubtless, the working of that Spirit which wrestles with the souls of men, even the most vile. Awful death had been beside them, and, when the King of Terrors has been realised, then it is that the world trembles as in an earthquake, when even foothold loosens, and some great gulf seems to open. The elder spoke first.

'It is your own money. It is mere restitution. You shall have it, and the interest and compound interest it has gained during all these years, while we have been keeping one another at bay. I know that I bought your silence on hard terms, but, had you told my history, you would have had nothing.'

'And no one would have believed me. All I wanted was a trifle from time to time to keep me going.'

'Now you will have a fortune. When do you leave England, that it may be made over to you before your departure?'

'As soon as my child is married. Oh, Harry! What years we have lost! But we are brothers again—and fathers. It is all a dream, and, when I try to think, I am lost. You will strive to be happy again, Harry. You will consider your wife and children before mammon. I wish I had been a better brother to you, but fate was

against us, Harry. Mother always said you would come round, because she always prayed for you. I laughed at their faith then, but now——'

Aspenel groaned heavily, and again silence closed the painful theme.

CHAPTER XI.

MOLTEN GOLD.

Mrs. Aspenel came home with the resolution to obey her husband, if possible, but his irritability, especially with her, made her task difficult. When he recurred to the subject of his ruined study, and requested her to examine what was left of it, with Gerard Clarville, her will was all for resistance, but his proved the stronger of the two. Some curious cerebral fancy took possession of him, and he resolved that she should be the one to see if anything remained of what, he would have it, she coveted.

Accordingly she and Gerard made their way over the fallen rafters and charred floors of passage and intermediate rooms, to the spot she had most dreaded in all that big house. It was now open to the sky, and, when they reached the place where the strong door had been, she trembled as if she were about to enter some ghostly chamber. A carpenter who accompanied them removed the temporary substitute for the door, and she followed Gerard into what she used to call 'The Miser's Den.' She need not have been afraid, for nothing was visible but heaps of rubbish. It seemed as if the square walls had been built to contain the *débris* of all the rooms that had surmounted it, together with their roofs and ceilings.

Workmen had been busy with the rest of the house, and a clearance of fallen timber and masonry had been effected, for the furtherance of the rebuilding; but, by

order of its owner, this apartment had been untouched, and Gerard had presided over the stopping up of the big gaps, where windows and doors had been. To all appearance this was unnecessary, for no vestige remained of furniture or fittings; only a confused mass of wood and stones.

After all, it was impossible to penetrate it, and Gerard was compelled to return to Mr. Aspenel and to tell him so. In his excitement at contradiction, he said first that he did not believe it; and afterwards that they must get men to clear a passage, or empty the room of the rubbish. His brother was with him and volunteered to help.

'The safe must be intact; it is fire-proof!' cried Aspenel, his greed uppermost again.

Loveridge accompanied Gerard to the scene and remained there while Gerard

and the carpenter went off in search of workmen. He had never spoken to Mrs. Aspenel, and his usual effrontery forsook him when he perceived that lady. He had resolutely avoided the presentation suggested by Janet, and she had equally kept aloof from him. Indeed, he could but feel an interloper.

Mrs. Aspenel had advanced a pace or two into the room, and was surveying the wreck with dismay. She had not left the front of the house before, since her return, and had not realised the result of a conflagration. Now she shuddered as she recalled her last visit to that spot, and a vision of her husband rose before her as he then was, implacable, vindictive, resolute. She recalled her own part in the interview, and wondered whether if she had been different he would have been less unnatural. In a moment the fire and its results thrust out personal feeling, and she

uttered a little cry as imagination conjured up what might have happened but for the merciful interposition of Providence.

Turning, she saw in the passage him who had just arrived in time to avert the final doom. Overwrought as she was, she fancied she knew not what, and stumbled amongst the rafters on which she was standing. He caught her just in time to prevent her falling, and placed her with some difficulty in safety—if safety there were, where crumbling mortar, loosened stones, and charred wood gave way beneath the feet at every moment.

'Mrs. Aspenel, I think,' said Loveridge, removing his hat and bowing profoundly.

He was never at a loss, and his self-possession stood him in good stead.

'My—my—husband's brother, I believe,' she returned, recovering her usual manner.

'We meet under strange circumstances, and in an odd sort of confusion,' he said,

carelessly; 'but we live in an odd world, and no one will ever succeed in making it even.'

Before she could reply, Gerard and a number of workmen came stumbling in. Almost simultaneously the boarding was removed from without from the casement-less windows, and the desolation was complete. The workmen began immediately to cast the *débris* out of the windows, and so to clear a passage to the spot indicated by Gerard, who had received instructions from Mr. Aspenel.

'It was there I found him,' whispered Loveridge to Gerard, and pointed to the exact place where the safe had been.

Mrs. Aspenel remained in her corner, trembling as she looked on.

At last the safe was reached, and Gerard dismissed the men before they were aware of its contents. He, Mrs. Aspenel, and Loveridge made their way to it. There it

stood, unscathed amid the wreck of all else, for was it not fire-proof? But the door had been left open, and on the floor lay a heap of molten gold, which must have poured from its mouth like the lava from a burning mountain. That door had been opened by the owner himself, and remained ajar. A yellow coating covered the top shelf of the safe; a yellow seam ran down it. In the bottom shelf were the embers of many papers, and the crumpled leaves of parchments—all of which must have represented tens of thousands of those golden playthings so ruthlessly made sport of by the flames. It was an awful sight, and might have convinced any gainsayer of the weakness of human ingenuity. Gerard knew that it was only a tithe of the wealth scattered here and there equally insecurely, and wondered what the end would be.

The trio looked at one another. Mrs.

Aspenel's face was white, her lips compressed.

'After all, it is best to spend, even in a worldly point of view,' ejaculated Loveridge. 'Poor Harry was sadly mistaken. I always told him so, but he wouldn't believe me. I think you have done your duty, madam, and may gracefully retire from the scene.'

'And I married for this!' muttered Mrs. Aspenel, glancing at Gerard, and looking as if about to faint.

'Take her away. I will mount guard,' said Loveridge.

Gerard helped her back through the dangerous passage and gave her into Janet's care. Then he went to Mr. Aspenel. He found Edith with him. She instantly left the room, as she always did when he appeared. He could only form one opinion of this result of her father's strange overtures, which was that she did

not love him, and that he had been a vain man when he almost fancied she did. He mastered a sharp pang when he took the seat she vacated, and told the poor wretch who had brought such misery on himself the result of the investigation.

'Bullion still. It must be re-cast,' he said. 'You will see to it for the children's sake and your own. Now, listen to me. You must take up your abode entirely in London. I shall never go there again. I am morally certain that I shall never more enter the office where I have made my wealth, or any of the places that have received it. I constitute you my substitute. No disclaimer! I have no one else that will see honestly to the interest of my children, and you will be one of them soon.'

'Once more, sir,' began Gerard, excitedly, 'you must put that out of the question. Miss Aspenel has avoided me ever

since you opened it, and I can undertake nothing if I am trammelled.'

'Avoided you, has she? I must set that to rights.'

'I will throw up all your work, Mr. Aspenel, and return to Lady Ascham, if you mention that subject again,' said Gerard. 'Your daughter and I were good friends until you made that proposal; now she barely speaks to me. I beg you will leave us to ourselves.'

'I have no one that I can trust. As my son-in-law, I could make you partner and identify you with myself; but I could scarcely do this under any other circumstances.'

Gerard's heart beat quick, and he felt that ambition of power and position which is inherent in most of us. What could he not do if Mr. Aspenel's words could be verified? But he struggled with the momentary temptation and conquered it.

He said that he would do his best to manage to disentangle the complicated affairs with the help of solicitors and other agents, but that he was incompetent to undertake what Mr. Aspenel mentioned.

'Go and consult your mother; ask her if she will live with you in London, and help you. I have no one else; no one else.'

The despairing tone of Aspenel's voice touched Gerard. The doctors said he was better, but gave no hope of absolute recovery. His actual state was concealed at his own particular request, and even Nurse True was bound over to secrecy. Gerard was sorely perplexed, and could not see where his own path of duty lay. Still, where so much was involved, he prayed not to let personal feeling stand in his way.

'I know my mother will be ready to help you and yours, sir,' he said, after some

hesitation. 'As manager, trustee——'

'Trustee! Then you think I must die,' groaned Aspenel. And 'the terrors of a troubled mind' returned, which Gerard was impotent to quell.

He called for Mr. Austen, the doctors, Nurse True, all who could advise either spiritually or corporeally, and bade Gerard leave him, since he would not accede to his request.

Gerard went straight to his mother, and told her what had passed. She was at once comforter and counsellor. She had not ventured to interfere between him and Edith, though she fancied she knew where the difficulty lay; but she now advised him strenuously to accept whatever post Aspenel proposed for him. She knew his probity, and that his own mind would not be warped by good fortune, come to him as it would. She saw what an immense field of usefulness might be opening before

him, and that he had no right to refuse to work in it.

'I will go and live with you in London, or do anything to help you,' she said. 'You may be sure Mr. Aspenel will give the means, because he is personally interested in the result. I think you should have an explanation with Edith before making up your mind.'

'How can I, when she flies from me as if I were a scarecrow?' he rejoined, much aggrieved. 'We were such good friends, and I never gave her any reason to suppose I had other feelings than friendship. She ought to know me better than to think I would purchase her with her father's partnership. I am not such a Jew as that.'

Mrs. Clarville was too wise to argue this point. Her faith was great, and she believed that whatever was best for her son would be brought to pass in some

way they could not foresee; she merely urged him to do what seemed his present duty, without looking right or left.

'I suppose that is to live in town, and undertake the management of the business there,' he said. 'If some disinterested person does not do it, all will go to rack and ruin, and he will be bankrupt.'

Gerard did not say this without reason. In spite of Mr. Aspenel's enormous wealth, he was not infallible, and had not cried wolf so long without some reason. He had experienced great losses by sea and land, and, since he had been rendered incapable by the fire, every unprincipled client and dependant had taken advantage of his state to enrich themselves. A company had failed of which he was director, and he was involved to an immense extent, while trade was depressed everywhere. Gerard knew all this, and would have hesitated to mix himself up with it, but for the strange

chain of circumstances which had wound round about him and Aspenel's family.

When he and his mother had talked all this over, he returned to the Park. He encountered Mrs. Aspenel and Janet. The former had been so upset by the investigation of the safe that Janet had prevailed on her to go out. They were fast friends now, to Gerard's great surprise.

'What can be done with that awful nugget?' asked Mrs. Aspenel.

'What can be done with our white mousey?' asked Janet, with a glance at him so reproachful that Gerard was taken aback.

'A nugget can be reconverted into specie; but a lost friendship is hard to reconstruct,' he replied; and passed on.

He felt very sore about Edith.

He found her father tranquil again, and prepared to listen to reason. He told him

what his mother had said, and added that, if sufficient means were provided, they would remove to London, and he would undertake whatever post he might see fit to place him in.

'I will think it all over and we will settle it in a few days. Meanwhile, you must go on as you are. I am expecting Lawyer Mason to draw up the deeds about Will's portion. That must be finished first, and you and Mrs. Aspenel must witness it, and see it carried out. She is a better woman of business than I thought. If I don't do it at once, I shall never do it at all.'

Gerard fully endorsed this speech of Aspenel's, and resolved to work night and day in the interest of his friends Loveridge and Fan.

CHAPTER XII.

TOM HARTON'S OFFENCE.

It need scarcely be recorded here that inquiries, both personally and by letter, poured in upon the Park. Rumour had been busy with its owner and his family, but rumour had not told the exact truth: it rarely does. Still, report had partially disclosed the brotherhood of Aspenel and his rescuer, and the parentage of Fan. Its many tongues had also been busy with the reasons of Mrs. Aspenel's absence and sudden return, and many were the speculations upon her husband's condition, and what he would do if he recovered, or what

would become of her if he died. The heir of Beechton had called, but had not been admitted; indeed, all visitors were refused upon plea of Mr. Aspenel's condition; even Mr. Tom Harton was not received with the old cordiality. Everybody and everything seemed changed by that fire, which had incapacitated the millionaire: but no one so much as Janet. She was of a strong, decided nature, and she told Edith that, having spent nearly a third of her life in gratifying herself, she meant to spend the rest of it for others.

She went straight to her point in a business-like sort of way. 'Nothing shall go wrong that I can set right,' she thought; and she began with Edith. But she found her more difficult to deal with than she imagined. She even succeeded better in her overtures to her step-mother, whose dislike she had overcome when in Paris. Edith was shyer and more reserved than

ever, and she sought in vain to discover the root of a certain estrangement between them.

'It is Gerard. I am sure it is Gerard,' she thought, and she tried what she could do with him. But he was always too busy to have 'the good talk' with her that he promised; and nothing came of her efforts. With Bruce she was perfectly successful, and the boy almost worshipped his beautiful and fascinating sister. She undertook his education, and, while the rest of the disordered household ran hither and thither to do the behests of its master, she and Bruce worked and played by turns.

Rather to their annoyance, Mr. Tom Harton waylaid them whenever he had the chance. As Janet went frequently to Hoplands, to assist Fan in her preparations for her wedding, and, as she expressed it, 'To become better acquainted with her new uncle,' he seized his opportunities.

As soon as he appeared, Bruce always ran off, so he frequently met Janet alone, somewhere between the Park gate and Hoplands. He was very inquisitive, and, in an off-hand way, managed to draw from Janet the state of affairs at the Park.

A fortnight or so after her return, he said he had a message for Mrs. Aspenel, and, while delivering it, turned, and walked with Janet into the park, which was unusual. He had always a certain fascination for her that he was probably aware of.

'As I hear Bruce is to be sent to school, and my services will be no longer required, will you kindly tell Mrs. Aspenel that I have accepted a travelling tutorship,' he said, with a keen, inquiring glance at Janet.

'I am very sorry. You will probably be long away,' she returned, involuntarily, with a tone of unmistakable regret.

'Yes; unless you bid me remain,' he said, his deep, dark eyes fixed upon her.

Janet did not pretend to misunderstand him. Her friends Maximilien and Wilbraham, and other admirers, had already taught her the science of admiration, and had by turns called her coquette, flirt, and other terms not complimentary; but she had laughed at them all. She had been heart-whole, in fact. Was she so now? Let her speak for herself.

'Unless I bid you remain,' she repeated, reflectively. 'I could not do that. Your father would be a more proper person, or your brother, who would like you to be at his wedding; or even Mrs. Aspenel, for whom you have sacrificed so much time.'

There was a slight inflection of voice on this last sentence.

'Neither of them would influence my movements,' he rejoined, carelessly. 'There

is no one in the world but you who could regulate my steps.'

Her fair face flushed, and she stood a moment silent before him. They were inside the Park wall, near the spot where Fan had poured out her troubles to her, and had warned her against this man. She remembered the scene well. She also remembered the days of her childhood, when she thought him the most perfect and delightful of mortals. But she also remembered that he had been devoted to Edith and her step-mother, and that he could, therefore, scarcely mean what he said to her. She understood him but in part; still she misdoubted him.

He took advantage of her hesitation to pour out a flood of eloquence, rapid and overwhelming enough to convince any girl. In short, he declared his love and made her an offer of marriage. He knew his power, but he could not read what was

passing through her mind. Indeed, she could not read it herself. She suddenly withdrew from him, and, leaning against a tree, said, decidedly,

'I never mean to marry. I have quite made up my mind to this. I like men best at a distance, and think women happier without them. They are all selfish. Even Monsieur, the best of men, was angry if his omelette was not to his taste; and as to Maximilien! *ma foi!* he was a tyrant. I think you are one also; and as to poor papa—well, he was so rich that he ruled the world with a golden rod; and, between ourselves, I am afraid you are not indifferent to fortune. Now, confess! You would not have made me this flattering proposal were I not the daughter of a millionaire. I am much obliged to you all the same, and am sorry to disappoint you; for it must have taken you time and trouble to make up your mind.'

The provoking girl looked at her admirer with an arch inquisition, which made him very angry.

'You are not in earnest, Miss Janet,' he said, restraining his wrath and forcing a smile. 'I am at liberty to believe as much as I like of your fanciful resolution. You are merely trying to pique and annoy me. You are quite capable of this.'

'And of keeping my resolution. Good-bye. Let us part friends. I daresay we shall meet at Fan's wedding. We are a sort of connection. The various marriages of my family and friends tend to make me averse to matrimony. I shall die an old maid.'

She held out her hand, but the offended worshipper of beauty or mammon declined to take it, and they parted—he in much indignation, she with regret.

He hurried off to his den at Hoplands, where he seated himself before a ponder-

ous volume which he had been reading that morning, and reviewed the interview. Defeat was impossible, he thought, for he esteemed himself highly. Still he had been defeated of late, and everything had gone against him. Usually, success had waited on him and came at his call; now fate seemed against him. He scarcely ventured to whisper, even to himself, in how many ways she had turned her back upon him. He had striven hard to win her, and she had slipped from him. Is success masculine or feminine? Rather neuter; for it ignores sex; so we will change the gender.

It has not been as yet recorded here that Mr. Tom Harton had already ventured, as far as prudence would allow, in making advances towards Edith. But she had repelled them so decidedly that he turned his attention to Janet. He was essentially a schemer and selfish, and it did not much matter to him how he ac-

quired those coveted millions, provided he secured them. His vanity had told him that he had only to ask and have either young lady, though he was anything but sure of the parental consent; and he had actually failed in both attempts. His handsome face grew as fierce as when he had attacked poor Fan in the same spot; and that had been also a failure. He had only got rid of her to have her return triumphant. It was altogether very disagreeable, and as he was not quite the 'villain of the piece,' but an ordinary mortal with selfish ends always in view, he was utterly disgusted with himself and everybody around him. He, so good-looking, agreeable, clever, and generally a favourite, to fail where he was sure of succeeding! It was too provoking! And he was morally convinced that Janet liked him, and that neither she nor Edith could have seen anyone they preferred to him. But he

had been precipitate with Janet, and would persevere. Nevertheless, he made up his mind then and there to accept the travelling tutorship still in abeyance, and, while yet in hot wrath, took pen and paper and wrote to Lord Thornborough, and expressed himself ready to accompany his son on a foreign tour. He should then escape Jack's wedding, and get breathing-time to mature other plans of siege.

While he was writing half-a-dozen words and biting his pen by turns, Janet was recounting to Edith what had passed.

'He must be a very bad man,' said Edith, 'for he used nearly the same words to me.'

Her face and manner expressed great indignation, but Janet merely laughed.

'They are all alike. They are dying to-day and as lively as butterflies to-morrow. You should have seen Maxmilien! He was always *au désespoir*, but he managed to

console himself by flitting to some other flower. As to Wilbraham, a run across country would cure him of a heartache that he was sure would kill him. And I could mention a dozen others, but I forbear.'

'I hope you are not a heartless flirt,' sighed Edith.

'I hope not. I am waiting for a cousin Gerard, and when he comes I promise you I will not avoid and torment him as you do.'

'Pray let that subject alone, Janet. He is going to live in London, and then you will perhaps forget it.'

'I shall, but you will not; neither will he. Hush! there is somebody in the passage. I daresay it is Bruce, with his ear at the keyhole. He would not spare his venerable tutor if he heard of his innocent efforts after fortune.'

'Whose innocent efforts?' asked Mrs.

Aspenel, who was the 'somebody' in the passage.

'Mr. Tom Harton. I am sure you will not be surprised to hear that he has just proposed for me, and as good as proposed for Edith,' replied ruthless Janet, whose face was flushed and whose eyes were flashing, despite a manner so careless that a bystander would have said with Edith, 'A heartless flirt.'

'You should not talk such rhodomontade, Janet,' said Mrs. Aspenel, repressing an exclamation that rose to her lips, and colouring as if she, also, had been stung by the wasp. 'I came to say that Mr. Loveridge has brought his daughter here at last, to be formally introduced to me, and I want you both to come downstairs with me to be present, as I really do not know what to say.'

'He will find conversation,' laughed Janet, running down before the others,

and entering the big drawing-room, where her strange relatives were awaiting the great lady.

'I'm so glad it is you, Miss Janet,' began Fan. 'I'm frightened to death. I never spoke to Mrs. Aspenel in my life, and always used to make her a little bob, like the school-children, when I met her. Ought I to do it now? Jack says I should slide one foot forward, so, and the other back, so, and bend my body gracefully between them.'

While Fan was making this unusual effort at politeness, Mrs. Aspenel and Edith came in.

'This is Fan,' cried Janet. 'She is making you her very best curtsey. It is quite French, though she doesn't know it. What my *maître de danse* called a glissade.'

'How do you do? I am glad to make your acquaintance,' said Mrs. Aspenel, holding out her hand.

'I nearly fell down,' whispered abashed Fan to Janet, who was exploding with laughter, as was Loveridge. 'Thank you, ma'am. It is very kind of you to ask me here. Sir sent his compliments, and hopes Mr. Aspenel is better.'

Jack had wickedly tutored Fan in this speech, and she delivered it with proper effect. Mrs. Aspenel smiled, and surveyed her husband's niece with surprise. She scarcely knew whether she or Janet were the handsomer, as they stood side by side, with Loveridge in the background, facing her and Edith.

'Mr. Aspenel is decidedly better, and hopes to be up in a day or two,' she replied, graciously, holding Fan's brown hand in hers. 'He wishes to see you, Mr. Loveridge. Will you kindly go to him?'

Loveridge went, and left the womankind together.

'Why have you been so long coming to see me?' asked Mrs. Aspenel, when they were seated.

'I didn't think you really wanted me,' returned truthful Fan. 'You are a grand lady and I am a born gipsy, in spite of my father and Mr. Aspenel being brothers. And you never spoke to me when we used to meet, so I feared you disliked me very much. You always turned your eyes away when I looked at you in church, and I used to think how different we were, and that you hated all the gipsies as much as Mr. Aspenel did.'

'You were mistaken. I am interested in the race; and I only turned my eyes away because yours were so black and piercing that they seemed to wish to read my very thoughts.'

'How funny!' exclaimed Fan. 'I often wondered what you were thinking of, and

never could find out. I knew you weren't thinking of the prayers.'

Mrs. Aspenel smiled, and secretly wished she had been more cordial with this strange girl; but she had neither been nor felt cordial with anyone until trouble brought her to her senses. She soon grew interested in Fan, as everyone did who came in contact with her, and the quartette was almost immediately engaged in discussing her wedding, which was to take place in a few weeks. She inquired if Mr. Tom Harton were to be present.

'I think he is going away next week. I heard him tell Sir so, just as we left the house. He had a letter in his hand, and I hope—I mean, I suppose—it was to Lord Thornborough, who wants him. Jack will be sorry, but I shall be glad.'

'He should have been best man,' put in Edith.

'Yes. But now Mr. Gerard will be,' re-

turned blushing, smiling, handsome Fan; and Edith hastily left the room, as she was wont to do when Gerard's name was mentioned.

CHAPTER XIII.

FAN'S WEDDING.

THERE was what is called a 'mixed company' at Fan's wedding; very mixed indeed. There was scarcely standing-room in Roselands Church; for, long before the bridal-party appeared, it was filled from porch to chancel. The ladies from the Cottages occupied distinguished positions as near the altar as possible, for they came very early to secure them; the inhabitants of the village crowded the pews, and those of the gipsy-camp all other available space. As to the gipsies, they had adorned themselves in various quaint and conspicuous

attire. Red cloaks, parti-coloured shawls, many-hued ribbons, floral hats, represented them in every corner. They had come from far and near to see the daughter of Wandering Will and the grand-daughter of the Tigress wed to the son of her benefactor. Other people of different classes had also come from far and near to see the brother and niece of Mr. Aspenel, who had been so proud and reserved, appear in public after their years of mysterious seclusion. Their story had got wind, and had created much sensation, particularly when mixed up with the history of the fire, and the consequent incapacity of the millionaire.

This publicity was just what Fan's friends had sought to avoid. The arrangements for the wedding had been as simple as possible, and confined, it was believed, to the precincts of Hoplands. Even Janet's desire for wreaths and a flower-lined

church had been decisively checked by Mr. Harton, and Fan herself had declared that she would wear neither veil nor typical orange-blossoms.

'What should I do with them in a wigwam in the backwoods?' she had asked, with her frank audacity.

Outside the church, scouts, in the shape of bare-footed children, were stationed on the watch, and they excited the expectant congregation from time to time by running in and out to their friends with the announcement, 'They're a-comin' now.' Not that the wedding-party was behind time, but when people are gathered together half-an-hour beforehand the moments lag. At Mr. Aspenel's particular request, they had adopted the new and convenient fashion of an afternoon marriage, and two o'clock was the hour appointed. Before the auspicious moment, Jack, the bridegroom-elect, and Gerard, his best man,

stood at the altar rails, and Mr. Austen within them. Ritualism had not yet made inroad into quiet, simple Roselands Church, and Mr. Austen withstood it valiantly; so that the marriage ceremonial was not complicated by change of place or position. Indeed, the spectators were disappointed in every way, for when Fan actually appeared, leaning on Mr. Harton's arm, she was not in bridal attire, but in 'travelling-dress,' as it is called. But no one thought of what she had on when they saw the crimson cheeks and lips, the flashing, yet liquid black eyes, and the luxuriant raven tresses. No one paused to remark upon the autumnal costume of reddish russet, or the autumnal branches of hips and haws that adorned it. Fan was Fan, and she meant to represent gipsydom and emigrant life, and not 'to set up for being a grand lady,' as she expressed it. Her bouquet was all that was bridal about her, and this came from the

Park, and was a *chef-d'œuvre* of Janet's and the gardener's. 'White camellias, stephanotis, and maiden-hair fern are *de rigueur*, and Jack would never think of Covent Garden,' said Janet. But Fan found her bouquet hard to manage, and held it much awry as she walked up the church, glancing at her gipsy relations and smiling at them.

Edith and Janet, her bridesmaids, were much more discreet; and even Bruce, who walked between them, kept his eyes on Fan's skirts. They were short, so he could not have acted as page, if he would, though he was duly attired in black velvet knickerbockers and black silk stockings, according to the best authenticated records of a bygone age. By-the-way, why are we of this enlightened nineteenth century retrograding towards the relics of the past? The present is much more satisfactory, and less laborious. So thought

Edith and Janet, for they wore the prevalent cream-coloured costumes, and should have been the brides for that much. However, dress is secondary to address, somebody says, and no one could have behaved better than Fan when she took Jack 'for richer for poorer,' and resolved to make him the best wife in the world. She said, 'Yes,' and 'I will,' with all her heart; and, as to Jack, it seemed that he could not utter those solemn words loud enough.

'He'll make her a good husband,' whispered her gipsy friends, with whom sound took the place of sense, as it does in a great many churches besides Roselands.

Mr. Harton gave the bride away, though Loveridge stood close to her. There had been an amicable dispute on this head, but Loveridge insisted on yielding precedence to Harton, whose voice trembled a little

when he had to pronounce his monosyllables.

Everybody had the satisfaction of hearing Jack kiss Fan when they were man and wife, and not only the gipsies, but the villagers, were well convinced that they were both born and bred for one another. Had increased conviction been needed, they would have had it when the happy pair walked down the church after vestry preliminaries were over. There were no tears and no change of any kind. Jack nodded to all his friends with his usual genial laugh, or, more properly, smile; and Fan's white teeth and dimples were perceptible as she glanced from one to another. Edith and Janet were much more demure as they followed; the one leaning on Gerard's arm, the other on Mr. Harton's. The spectators did not realise the feelings of Gerard and Edith when thus involuntarily brought into proximity;

nor the scarcely concealed delight of Janet at the arrangement. And nobody realised the fact that a few moments before Fan had, for the first and last time in her life, signed herself Frances Brand, and that her newly-found relatives had duly witnessed the signature.

If no floral decorations greeted her when she walked to her bridal, they were not absent when she almost danced down the aisle. All the village children had brought autumn flowers from their gardens, and the gipsy urchins had culled the treasures of common and hedgerow, so that chrysanthemums and Michaelmas daisies, heath and traveller's-joy covered the path from altar to lych-gate. Bruce, not to be outdone, took the rose from his button-hole and cast it before the joyous bride, whom he had much difficulty in recognising as his cousin. He was walking by the side of her father.

When this strangely amalgamated wedding-party reached the lych-gate they were suddenly arrested.

'Thanks be to the Lord! You are lawfully wed,' greeted the bride and bridegroom in a loud voice.

It was Mrs. Lee, the old Tigress.

'And so we are, Mother Lee,' cried Jack, enthusiastically, holding out his hand which she took in both hers.

'Be kind to her, and an old woman's blessing shall follow you. Clorandy, her mother, was handsome and pure as she, but——' here Loveridge stepped forward and whispered something into her ear. She paused, and changed the thread of her discourse. 'I brought you a wedding-gift,' she continued. 'Keep it as long as you live.'

She drew forth from beneath her shawl a handsomely-bound Bible, and put it into Fan's hand. Poor Fan was overcome for

the first time, and tears filled the black eyes. She kissed the old woman, and thanked her. Jack, in the exuberance of his feelings, invited her to Canada, but she heeded him not. She raised her arms and spread them out before the pair, pronouncing, with solemn emphasis, the Scriptural benediction:

'The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord lift up His face upon you and give you peace.'

She vanished among the crowd almost before any, save the bridal-party, was aware of her presence. The bells were pealing, the people were shouting, and this little scene was unobserved. But it solemnised Fan for the moment.

'We will read in it every day of our lives,' she whispered to Jack.

'We will, my dear,' he replied. And we venture to affirm that the promise was faithfully kept.

They walked away amidst cheers and good wishes, followed by their friends; through the pretty village, down the shady road, but not on to Hoplands. Somewhat against their will they stopped at the Park lodge-gates.

'I suppose we must go, Jack?' whispered Fan.

'I suppose we must,' replied Jack, ruefully.

The vicar and the ladies came up breathless.

'We all wish you joy!' cried Miss Vigors, who acted as spokeswoman, and Fan was soon overpowered by the embraces of her friends.

'We are going out to tea, but you must all come to Hoplands to supper,' said Mr. Harton. 'I shall want somebody to console me when they're off.' His voice faltered.

'I will do that,' said Janet. 'I'm going in for village charities.'

'Five o'clock, sharp,' said Mr. Harton.

Mrs. Clarville joined Loveridge, who seemed to be rather out in the cold, and felt very uneasy. She herself was made happy by seeing Gerard and Edith once more together, though they did not appear to have much to say to one another.

The Park gates were wide open, the lodge-keeper and her children stood behind them bowing and curtseying, and the wedding-party marched through. Mrs. Clarville went with them, so did the vicar; but the ladies and a crowd of distant spectators remained outside the charmed enclosure.

'It is very good of you to give up your own plans for poor papa's sake,' whispered Janet to Mr. Harton.

'No merit of mine, but the force of circumstances, Miss Janet,' returned Harton. 'But for them you would have had my son Tom as *garçon de noces* to-day, instead of an old fellow like me.'

'I am quite content, if you are. I suppose he was obliged to go abroad,' replied Janet, demurely.

To the surprise of his family, Mr. Aspenel had particularly requested that the wedding-feast, such as it was, should be held at the Park. He had now so many whims and was so irritable over them, that it was difficult to gratify them or him. Nurse True and Gerard were the only people who could manage him, and they humoured him in most things. Accordingly, Mrs. Aspenel prepared an afternoon repast under his orders, which was ample if not sumptuous. With some difficulty she had prevailed on him to order a wedding-cake, but he declined champagne.

'Let us go back and finish up at Hoplands,' said Fan to Jack; for she felt sadly out of place among her kinsfolk. 'Ask Sir if we may stay to supper.'

'You must call him father now, Fan,' said Jack.

'Oh! I never could. But I will when I write,' she replied.

Jack preferred her request to his father, and he nodded and winked, and performed various grimaces, to the effect that his arrangements were made. Mrs. Aspenel was a perfect hostess, and she found Mr. Harton a very agreeable man, albeit she had fancied him a mere farmer. The bride and bridegroom were overwhelmed with civilities, and, in spite of certain awkwardnesses, the meal passed off as well as such things usually do.

CHAPTER XIV.

FAN'S FAREWELLS.

'Now I think I am ready. Draw down the blind at my right. Those at the back don't signify. I daresay Mrs. Aspenel ordered champagne, after all!'

'I think not, sir.'

These remarks passed between Mr. Aspenel and Nurse True. The former had left his bed, and had been moved into a small boudoir adjoining his wife's morning-room, which, it will be remembered, was turned into his sleeping apartment, or rather sick-chamber, when he returned to the Park from Hoplands. He was seated

in an easy-chair with all the accessories of invalidism about him. The strong, resolute man had become a hypochondriac, and dreaded a beam or a breath, lest the one should disclose, the other disturb his melancholy condition. His mind was clear for business, but clouded on other points. Thus on one side of him were ledgers and papers, on the other all sorts of nostrums. But conspicuous amongst the former was a variety of religious books, which were read aloud to him in the intervals of business and medical arrangements. If his household had been bond-servants before, they were slaves now; only they were willing slaves, because they believed him to be striving against nature in his endeavour to atone for the past, and in abject terror of the future. Death was ever before him; not as liberator, but as conqueror; not as forerunner to a better life, but as tyrant, conducting to chains and dungeons.

He had not yet grasped the Hand of mercy held out to ransom the enslaved.

He was enveloped in an ample dressing-gown, which concealed such parts of his body as he chose to hide, though beneath it he was fully dressed. He wore a large velvet cap, the tassels of which fell over one cheek, and the band of which came down to his eyes. His face was terribly seamed, but the scars were thus partially concealed. He was no longer the dapper, well-kempt, carefully got-up gentleman that daily left his house for his office in order to heap up his millions; but a wreck of manhood, and of all that makes manhood worthy. Fear had usurped the seat of confidence, and a slowly-awakening conscience was replacing the black chaos of a soul enwrapped in greed. Restitution was the word ever before his eyes, and the struggle of his mind between justice and avarice was like the wrestling of a con-

demned criminal with his executioner. It was to Nurse True and Gerard alone that he displayed this conflict, and they—the former especially—strove to allay it with the all-conquering force of Scripture. She had a text for every phase of mental struggle, and happily he believed they were written expressly for him. The fire and its consequences were ever before him, and he was perpetually muttering, 'Saved as by fire,' 'Purified by fire,' and similar sentences.

'There is nothing more to be done, is there?' he asked, irritably. 'Then tell them all to come here. All? Yes, all. Why not? I forgot; not Bruce, no, not Bruce. The girl is my niece, and I must give her a wedding-present. Not the diamonds I gave the Mrs. Aspenels one after the other, but something tangible. Make haste, or I shall change my mind.'

Nurse True left him, and he laid hold of

a sealed packet placed on the table at his left.

'A goodly sum, but he is reformed and saved my life; and we once loved one another,' he said, as he clenched the packet and pressed it to his breast as if it was something dear to him. At the sound of approaching footsteps he laid it down again, and prepared to receive his visitors. His brother came in first, followed by the bride and bridegroom. He led them up to Aspenel, and, with his customary jaunty air, introduced them.

'I wish you both joy,' said Aspenel, politely, offering his left hand, which they took successively. 'I used to know you, Mr. Jack Harton, before your father and I disagreed, but I was never presented to your wife. Is your father here?'

Mr. Harton advanced, and they shook hands. Still Aspenel offered his left. They all started and shuddered a little at

his appearance, for he looked ghastly with his white and disfigured face. The rest of the party took seats at a little distance. He asked the four nearest him to be seated also.

'Quite serio-comic!' exclaimed the incorrigible Will. 'Why, Harry, I never knew you were such an actor. You have a fine scenic taste. We are all dressed to order, and are grouped to perfection.'

This sally caused Aspenel to smile painfully. It reminded his brother of *L'homme qui rit*, and he grew serious again. But the diversion had produced its effect, and Aspenel spoke more cheerfully and naturally.

'When do you all leave England?' he asked.

'On the twenty-fifth,' replied Loveridge, who took upon himself the office of spokesman. 'Jack and Fan go off to London to-

night, and on to Liverpool to-morrow. I join them in a few days.'

'You all like the prospect of emigration?'

'We pine for it. Why, my dear Harry, England is not big enough to hold us.'

'No place in the world like the far West for space and freedom,' put in Jack.

'They don't think of me, squire,' sighed Harton, senior.

'He has promised to come out to us, sir, and help to found a settlement,' said Fan, whose pent-up voice was clamouring for an outlet.

'Such being the case, I make restitution. Being reformed, half of my father's property belongs to my brother, William Brand, according to my father's will. He did not leave much, but it has accumulated since his death, and the account, together with a copy of the will, is in this parcel. Mr. Harton, you can go out at once and begin your settlement.'

He placed the sealed packet in his brother's hand. He trembled perceptibly as he did so.

'Open it somewhere else. Gerard Clarville will explain. He witnessed the deed together with Austen. Is Austen here?'

'He remained in the drawing-room with my mother,' said Gerard, who had drawn near as if to assist the speaker.

'Then we are all of one family, or shall be,' resumed Aspenel, glancing from those immediately surrounding him to his wife and daughters at a little distance. 'I may as well speak out. This act of justice will cripple me, and—cripple me, did I say? I am crippled already, not only in fortune but body. I have lost my right arm. Burnt to the bone whilst seizing the—the —gold. Accursed gold, people call it; but I don't look on it in that light. But for you, Will, I should have been burnt to death.'

'Then my end is better than my beginning, Harry; and, you know, the "end" justifies the means,' said irrepressible Loveridge. 'Clarville would preach us a sermon, and say we are spared to turn over new leaves.'

'I have lost my right arm!' groaned Aspenel.

'Then you must turn them over with the left,' replied his brother, who could never resist a joke.

'I will be your right arm, papa,' came from a couch on which Edith and Janet were seated.

Therewith rose the impulsive Janet; and she came and knelt at her father's knee. Never before had child of his knelt there.

'You, Janet!' he exclaimed, and extended the hand involuntarily.

'Yes, papa,' she answered, taking it in both hers. 'Let me be your right arm. I

have never been of use to anyone; now I devote myself to you. I give up gaiety, accomplishments, everything to be your secretary. Gerard in town, Janet in the country, and you won't mind your loss so much. You shall make a business woman of me, and Mrs. Aspenel a housekeeper, and so I shall follow the fashion; for, you know, even ladies of quality are beginning to learn trades. One gets tired of doing nothing.'

'Thank you. It is an age of female excitement,' said Aspenel, with that painful attempt at a smile. 'I signed the deed with my left hand. It is improving. Eh, Gerard?'

Nobody but Gerard had any real influence with Mr. Aspenel; and no one else knew the exact state of his affairs. To him he had revealed the sad fact that his 'unworthy hand' and arm were burnt to the bone, and never could be used again;

and it had been with his aid that the deed just given to his brother had been drawn up. To him he had confided the events of their early lives, and to him he wished to give the management of his affairs. To him he appealed under all circumstances, and Gerard's duties waxed every day more and more.

But the 'Eh, Gerard!' turned the minds of the party from Janet's semi-sensational proposal to the actual state of the case. Not even Mrs. Aspenel knew how entirely helpless her husband was, and she looked with unfeigned distress at the maimed and broken-down man. So did the other spectators, and Mr. Harton made a move to go. Meanwhile, Edith, who had been, hitherto, her father's best help, seemed to be left out in the cold. Alone on the couch, she grew whiter and whiter. The scene before her seemed to be some phantasmagoria, and she knew that she was feeling faint,

as she did when Gerard bore her from the fire. She made an effort to rise, and leave the room. Gerard saw it, if no one else did. He went to her, while the others were gathered round Mr. Aspenel, and whispered,

'Let me help you. You are ill. Come to my mother.'

He supported her from the room unperceived, and once more left her in Mrs. Clarville's care, with the words,

'It is too much for her, mother. Too much for all of them.'

'Where is the purse, Clarville?' was the question asked when he returned. 'Give it to her. Give it to my—my niece. You know I can't hold it.'

Gerard placed a purse in Fan's hand, and Mr. Aspenel muttered something about a wedding-present; but his magnanimity was fast relapsing into selfishness, and a longer delay with Edith would

have deprived Fan of the golden gift prepared for her. It is not easy for avarice to become generosity.

'Is this all mine?' cried Fan, holding up the purse with a puzzled look. 'What shall I do with it? I know. Jack, we will give it to the gipsies.'

Mr. Aspenel's alarmed negative was cut short by his brother, who made a little speech, which he had been preparing ever since he received the deed.

'Thank you, brother,' he said, and his voice faltered. '"Let the dead past bury its dead." Neither Fan, nor Jack, nor I cares for the money, but we are thankful for your love and friendship. We rejoice in your generosity. I take it all as a gift, not, as you put it, as restitution. I ask your forgiveness for my faults, and heartily forgive yours. We thank you all for your kindness on this auspicious occasion. We shall be glad to welcome any of you to our

Canadian settlement, and mean to invite our Egyptian brothers and sisters to join us there. They will make admirable settlers in a country where there is plenty of space.'

This speech took Mr. Aspenel's breath away, so that he could not protest. Fan kissed Mr. Aspenel's hand—threw her arms round Janet, and inquired for Edith.

'She is not well,' whispered Gerard. 'Do not draw attention to her.'

'It is nearly five o'clock, and we must go,' broke in Mr. Harton, and in a few minutes he, the bride and bridegroom, and Loveridge were on their way to Hoplands. Mr. Austen, Gerard, and his mother followed soon after.

'I wish he hadn't given me all this money,' said Fan. 'I declare there are twenty pounds.'

Their reception at Hoplands was much more vociferous than that of the Park, for

Mr. Harton had prepared a feast both in dining-room and kitchen. In the former the ladies from the Cottages figured in their best attire; in the latter, a contingent of gipsies and the farm-labourers smoked the calumet of peace. Healths were drunk and Jack made a speech; but Fan was entirely cast down. She realised at last that she was about to part with the best friends in the world, and she knew not if ever they should meet again.

'Why, it is nothing to cross the herring-pool,' said genial Mr. Harton. 'You will soon be here again for a holiday.'

'It is the only bit of geography Fan knows,' said Miss Vigors. 'She was never tired of travelling to America.'

'And now I am going there with Jack!' she cried.

This crossing the ocean to another continent is a serious thing, even in these days when continents are almost united by

means of steam, and we nearly hop from one to another. As the moment of separation approached, Fan began to realise the distance.

'It is just like starting for another world,' she said to Mr. Harton. 'Only Jack has been there before.'

Poor Mr. Harton! This young couple were the delight of his existence, but no one thought of him in the excitement of departure. He was to be left alone. His heart was brimming over with emotion, but he put on a cheerful countenance. Hand-in-hand with Jack, and with Fan's arms round him, he yet laughed at Fan's philosophy. But he grew grave when he suddenly felt her thrust something into his pocket. It was Mr. Aspenel's purse of golden sovereigns. She placed her hand over his mouth and whispered in his ear that she and Jack wished him to distribute it amongst the poor, including the gipsies.

'It is my thank-offering,' she said, with a sob; 'and it is my very own.'

Loveridge, who knew what was passing, put in his ever-ready word. He said that what was his was theirs, and, although he had not opened his packet, he knew that he should be well provided for. Remonstrance was cut short by friends gathering close around the two fathers and their children. Mr. Austen blessed the young couple audibly, and Mrs. Clarville and Gerard, with the ladies, uttered an emphatic 'Amen.'

'Take care of Sir,' sobbed Fan, appealing to all her friends at once.

The dogs began to whine pitifully, for they knew quite well what was happening, and when she stooped to stroke and kiss, and bid them good-bye, there was general lamentation at Hoplands.

When the carriage that was to take them to the station drove up, out rushed

the kitchen guests. The custom of throwing old shoes after the bride is said to have originated with the gipsies; and anyone who has seen a gipsy wedding will readily believe it. On this occasion Fan's friends and connections had gathered a miscellaneous bundle of these typical missiles, and fired a volley of them after her. We will not be rude enough to pronounce upon their condition; but they were neither fabricated of satin nor kid. Yet was there one amongst them of delicate white. This had been given by Janet to Gerard with orders to throw it after the carriage. He did so, and, the maids having completed the ceremonial by the proper complement of rice, everybody said that Jack and Fan were now one.

CHAPTER XV.

JANET'S RUSE.

Mr. Aspenel grew more restless than usual after the wedding-party left the Park. He began to repent of his generosity, or restitution, as he phrased it, and his mind was much perplexed by going over the calculations he had already made of what was due to his brother of his father's property. He began to wonder whether Janet, who was really as clever as she was handsome, had a taste for calculation, and whether she might not be, as she said, of some use to him. He could not always command Gerard, because he was obliged

to be in London more than half his time; and Edith, although truly willing, had no adaptability; while he could never be half-an-hour with his wife without raking up her past offences. But Janet, she was fresh and amusing, and, as he had spent a small fortune on her education, she ought to repay him. He sent for her.

Nurse True found her with Mrs. Aspenel and Edith, talking over Fan and her father. Mrs. Aspenel was of opinion that, since they were all so closely connected, it was quite providential that they should be transplanted to another continent.

'My uncle amuses me,' said Janet. 'He and papa are marvellous contrasts. What, old True, papa wants me, specially me!' she added, as True delivered her message.

No sooner did she join her father than he began the subject he had at heart. He never beat about the bush, and

his old business habits were returning.

'You offered to help me, Janet. What can you do?' he began.

'I can read aloud. I can write a decent hand, and spell remarkably well. I can speak French like a native, and German fluently but ungrammatically.'

'French and German!' he repeated, thoughtfully. 'Can you write and read German characters?'

'Of course. I am afraid my painting will not help you, papa, though I am not a bad artist. Mr. Holt, our arithmetic master, used to say I had a fine bump for mathematics, but it was undeveloped.'

'We will develop it, Janet. If you meant what you have said just now, you may be of use to me in languages and figures. Edith is too delicate. Besides, I mean her to marry Gerard and live in London. They will be of most use there. How is this to be managed?'

'By letting them alone. I have tried, and the more I say the wider grows the gulf. Gerard won't marry for money, and Edith won't marry to order. I think they are right.'

This unintentional thrust went home. He knew that he had thrice married 'to order,' or for something like it. But he was striving to amend his ways, and perhaps his children might improve upon them.

'You see, Janet, I have had an escape from death, and that fire was an awful warning. Nurse True says it was for good. She is right, I suppose, since it brought Will to save my poor life. But this arm, Janet; this arm!'

'Let me replace it,' said Janet, almost affectionately; for helplessness, whether in age or infancy, rouses the sympathy of youth.

'You will have hard work. But the money will be yours amongst you.'

'I hate money. I detest the word. If I am to work for you, it must be for love.'

'You for love, Gerard for pity, Edith for duty, Mrs. Aspenel for what?' he laughed his painful laugh.

'For all in one, if you will let her. She is very good-hearted if she is hot-tempered. We all treated her badly. I know I did, and am ashamed of myself. I mean to be like a daughter or a sister to her for the future. She is very sorry for you, papa, and when she was in Paris it was all we could do to prevent her coming here.'

'Why did you prevent it?'

'Because we didn't know how you would receive her, or whether it was prudent for her to come while you were so ill away from home.'

'She really wished to come back?'

'She certainly did. I think she is sorry that she ever left you. But one is always sorry for something or other.'

Mr. Aspenel grew reflective. He wondered if he were really sorry for the past or only terrified into penitence. This he knew—that he could never again uplift that right hand either to clutch gold or strike a woman. He shuddered, and the nervousness from which he suffered attacked him. He bade Janet summon Nurse True, and send his brother and Gerard to him when they arrived. Then he reversed his command, and told her to read to him a certain third chapter of the First of Corinthians which had seized on his imagination and frequently haunted it. Whenever the horrors took hold of him, he instantly turned to Holy Scripture, and would sometimes clutch the Bible as he had clutched the gold. The terrors of an awakened

conscience are awful to witness, but how much more awful to experience! Janet little knew what she promised, when she offered to be her father's right arm.

She was frightened when she took the Bible, but she had much self-command, and read the chapter clearly and emphatically. She had the dramatic element in her nature, and could do nothing without a slight movement of the body and change of voice. 'If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved; yet so as through fire.' She had never realised those words before, and as she read them she paused, and looked involuntarily at her father. He seemed to be awaiting them in breathless anxiety.

'Through fire! through fire!' he exclaimed. 'Gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, stubble. All burnt, melted, because I took no heed how I builded there-

on. But I may be saved on repentance. Gerard says so; Nurse True says so; "saved as by fire."'

'That is what the Bible says,' added Janet, terrified at this sudden excitement.

'Finish the chapter, girl. I gloried in my own craftiness. I calculated and reasoned in vain. I must become a fool. That is what I have been. It is too late —too late to grow wise?'

'I believe it is never too late, papa. I hope not, for I have been very foolish myself.'

Janet's assurance was gone, and, as she watched her father's painfully drawn face and nervous movement of hand, she felt frightened and powerless. She was seated at the table on his left, which was piled with parchments, the Bible in their midst. She was young, beautiful, ardent-minded, and resolute. She had on the bridesmaid's

dress just worn at Fan's wedding. She felt capable of conquering the world. He was old before his time, disfigured, maimed, oppressed, conscience-stricken. Neither flowery garments nor tasselled head-gear would conceal the wreck of what was once the miser-millionaire. They were father and daughter. They had never before had anything in common. Now a tremendous pity melted Janet's soul. The Word she had been reading, the mental suffering she saw, the mixture of penitence and selfishness, and, before all, the awakening of filial feeling, appeared to change her very nature. She burst into tears. She knelt down before the stricken man; she took the hand that lay on his knee; she called him 'Father,' for the first time; she declared before her Heavenly Father that she would help him if she could. She knew not if such sudden emotion would blossom into reality; but it was sincere.

'You excite me, Janet; I don't understand you,' said her father; and she recalled the cold, precise, unapproachable parent of the days before the fire.

We do not put off our nature like a garment, though God's grace can change it by degrees. Very little served to repress, but not extinguish, Janet's ardour.

For a moment she felt offended, and the bent head arose proudly, the tearful eyes flashed. Only a moment. That sad wreck warned off pride and self-assertion, and produced the humble words,

'I am sorry I excited you, papa. Perhaps I had better see if they have come from Hoplands. If not, I will send Nurse True.'

'Thank you. I owe them life and—wisdom.'

As Janet left the room, her father's eyes followed her, and he muttered,

'Can she, will she keep her promise?'

She found Gerard and Loveridge with Mrs. Aspenel and Edith. She was in the mood for self-sacrifice, or some sort of great achievement; so she thought to herself, 'Now, or never!' and said, with much decision,

'Papa wants you, Mr. Loveridge; and I think you should come also, Mrs. Aspenel.'

Neither of those summoned waited for a moment's explanation. They rose at once; for Janet looked flurried, and they knew that the patient brooked no delay. Loveridge hurried to him.

'Papa doesn't really want you,' said Janet to Mrs. Aspenel, 'but I do. Come with me, and I will tell you all that has passed between us. I think I have managed that little *tête-à-tête* with consummate skill. If they don't hit it off while papa is in the humour, they never will get

married at all. If I had been Edith, or rather if Edith had been I, it would have been settled long ago.'

Mrs. Aspenel smiled and went with Janet into the hall, where Bruce dashed in upon them.

'I have seen them off,' he cried. 'Nurse True went with me. She said she wanted just to wish them good-bye. It was so jolly! There were a lot of gipsies, and ever so many other people, and that old woman that sells the tracts, and old Mr. Harton, and Gerard, and that funny man who says he is my uncle. They came the short way, just after the carriage, and Fan was laughing and crying; she kissed me, mammy; and Jack was as merry as a grig—what's a grig?—and when they got into the carriage everybody shouted, and it was such fun.'

'I wish I had been there,' sighed Janet.

'I daresay you'll be married next, Janet.

Mammy, when is Janet going to be married ?'

As it was impossible to settle this knotty point, Janet carried Bruce off to prevent his intruding on the pair in the drawing-room, for which stately apartment he was making.

Meanwhile, the brothers were engaged in a strange and interesting interview. Wandering Will was remonstrating with Heartless Harry upon the amount of fortune declared to be his own. It amounted to between ten and twenty thousand pounds. The three hundred a-year which he had claimed was much exceeded, and, if not a millionaire like his brother, he considered himself a rich man. But he would not believe that the half of the business and personalities left by his father could amount to so large a sum. Moreover, he declared that he could not be sure he was reformed, and that he should prefer

beginning life again as an emigrant without capital, to starting as a man of consequence The amicable argument lasted a long time. It interested Mr. Aspenel, being about pounds, shillings, and pence, and he did his best to explain to his brother how money accumulated when properly laid out at large and compound interest. But Will could not, or would not, take it in.

'Fetch Gerard Clarville,' said Aspenel at last, almost angrily.

Loveridge left the room, and encountered Janet.

'I will take the message,' she said; and he returned to his brother.

She had been wandering aimlessly about ever since she had closed the door on Gerard and Edith; now with Bruce and Mrs. Aspenel; now with Nurse True; anon in the hall. The wedding had interfered with the natural course of meals, and

dinner had been early; indeed, regularity had forsaken the Park. It was nearly dark, and when Janet reached the hall she paused a moment to consider the situation. Doing so, she glanced through the glass door, and saw the round October moon already risen, and her light dancing fantastically among the branches of the big elms, and playing with the shadows on the drive.

'How soft and beautiful! How different from all this turmoil!' she thought, as she proceeded to the drawing-room door. 'Perhaps I shall interrupt them at the moment of the *éclaircissement*. But probably there has been none. They are so prosaic, and conscientious, and ultra-unpractical, that they are sure to have been talking about any and everything but the tender passion. Still, I must warn them, for if they are just coming to an understanding it would be unkind to burst in upon them.'

So Janet coughed loudly, made a stampede, and finally turned the handle of the door backwards and forwards, until it was opened for her from within. It was Gerard who assisted her.

'Papa wants you,' she said.

He passed her by without a word. She was greatly disheartened, but she went into the room. Edith was standing in the moonlight, like a white ghost. Surely she would not be standing, and he going to open the door if the ruse had succeeded! Poor Janet! She was quite cast down. But Edith ran towards her, and threw her arms about her, as is usual in cases of excitement; at least, so say the story-tellers. Janet was in despair, for Edith had certainly been crying. Her eyes were moist as they glittered in the moonlight.

'What has happened? Why are you crying? Cousin Gerard isn't such a brute——' began Janet.

'No! no, dear! I am so happy! so happy!' replied Edith.

'Then I was quite right to leave you together,' said enchanted Janet.

'Yes. We misunderstood one another. He thought papa was forcing him upon me against my will; and I thought I could never look at him again, after so strange a proposal.'

Further confidences were arrested by the entrance of a footman with a light. Sentiment and moonshine disappeared for the time, hidden by closed blinds and wax candles; but excited Janet carried off her sister to their room, where she drew forth the story of an attachment as pure and sincere as it was likely to be lasting.

CHAPTER XVI.

'WHO IS TO GIVE HER AWAY?'

Novels end where life begins, we are told, and certainly a wonderful new life began for most of the actors in this drama, after the *dénoûment* arrived at in the last chapter. Every person and thing seemed changed; Mr. Aspenel, perhaps, most of all. He was a long time settling his affairs, and, while this was proceeding, the new life hinted at above began and proceeded also. In a few days after Fan's wedding, he took leave of his brother. He and Gerard had managed between them to convince Wandering Will that

the deed he had received really represented neither more nor less than the money due to him from his father's will, and to be paid 'on his reformation.' This 'reformation' became a subject of difficulty, but it was got over by his resolving that Jack and Fan should sign a paper, when he received his dividends, to the effect that he was really 'a reformed character.' He laughed a great deal when he propounded this plan, but his more serious and calculating brother thought it a good one. If that brother was ever pathetic, it was when they parted. Mr. Aspenel had not believed in unselfish devotion and love until his brother had risked his life to save him from an awful death. This made him first wonder if there were not things more precious than gold.

As to Loveridge, his farewells were as sensational as his life had been, and he went from friend to friend, theatrical and

tearful-grateful, and sometimes consequential. He invited all to his new settlement, particularly Mr. Harton, who faithfully promised to come, and he held out wonderful hopes to such of the gipsies as he knew, if they inclined to emigrate. To Gerard he was confidential, and declared that he owed all his good fortune to him.

A few days after his departure, his brother received a letter from him. He and and his children were on the eve of starting for Canada, and were in fine spirits.

Mr. Aspenel, on the contrary, was greatly depressed.

'I have lost the only person who ever really cared for me,' he sighed, when Janet read the letter.

'We will all care for you, if you will let us,' she said.

Her way of putting things sounded like home truths, and had their effect.

It was considered prudent not to men-

tion to him Gerard and Edith's engagement until he again broached the subject. They did not know how he might take it, when he found it was an accomplished fact.

'What has happened to Edith? She looks quite happy. I suppose she thinks me recovered, as you all do,' he said, after Janet had read Loveridge's letter.

'She has done what you wished, papa. She is engaged to Gerard,' replied Janet, boldly.

'What I wished! Who said I wished it?'

'You did, frequently. You told them so. They were only waiting for an opportunity to tell you they had obeyed you.'

Janet laughed, but he was offended. We are often displeased when our wishes are accomplished without our knowledge. He sent for Edith. She recounted her

little history simply and naturally, winding up with—

'And now, papa, we will help you as best we can.'

Help him! Could he want help, he the strong, self-reliant, successful man? Yes, he wanted help, and he knew that this tie would bind Gerard to him. He offered his child no congratulations—he could not; but he sent for Mrs. Aspenel. He always vented his chagrin on her.

'Why did you let Clarville and Edith engage themselves without my consent? But, since you have done it, the sooner they are married the better. Let it be next week.'

'Impossible!' replied the wife.

'Why? Austen is surrogate, and they can get a license. I won't have breakfasts and nonsense. I am in no condition for such things. I may be dead to-morrow. You don't realise my state, Mrs. Aspenel.'

'Indeed I do. We are all anxious to help you, and wish to do just what you like.'

'Then get this wedding over.'

'I will do my best.'

Mrs. Aspenel did her best, and, after a consultation with the parties most concerned, fixed on the earliest possible period. When Mr. Aspenel had seen Gerard, he became reconciled to some little delay.

'I should never have presumed, sir, but for your great kindness,' he said, truthfully. 'Edith and I would have been estranged for ever but for your consent and Janet's interference.'

'I believe you have been honest. Now, you can have no objection to being made my junior partner, and taking the management of my affairs. I never mean to speculate again. I have done with accumulating. I give you permission to wind up the business as it stands, and to start afresh on different principles.'

'I could not gamble, sir,' said Gerard, hesitating.

'You need not. I have been too near death to gamble for longer life, when I find there is a Power stronger than mine who can ruin my game in a moment. Henceforth I trust you to play for me.'

Gerard felt overwhelmed by the responsibilities thus thrust upon him. He had neither acceptance nor rejection of them ready; so he was silent.

'You are not satisfied?' resumed Aspenel, irritably. 'I give you part of my wealth, which will help you to convert the masses, as they call the people; I give you my daughter, who is worth more than most girls; I give you unlimited power and action; and all because I know you want nothing and are honest. Yet you are not satisfied.'

'I am afraid,' said Gerard at last. 'The prospect dazzles me.'

'Then you refuse!'

'No. I will do what I can, God helping me.'

'Then we will begin at once. No time to lose. There may be another fire, or a flood, or an earthquake, or a shipwreck. I have suffered from all these, and want to insure what is left, if I can. You are fireproof, and better than an iron safe.' He smiled grimly. 'Has the gold been cleared off, and have they begun upon my study?'

'Yes, sir. The rebuilding goes on rapidly.'

'When you are gone, I will see to that. An awful expense; but I forget. I have sworn to leave all that in your hands. Now, if we come to grief, it will be your fault, not mine. I want Nurse True. She is as sincere and unselfish as you are. I should be lost, body and soul, but for you two. She has been a devoted servant;

she has never swerved from her duty.'

Gerard rang, and Nurse True answered. Mr. Aspenel told her that her first care, Edith, was about to be married, and asked her where she would best like to live—whether with her in London, or at the Park. She hesitated a moment, then said, cheerfully, that she should desire to be where she was most wanted, and that, perhaps, she might divide her time between the two—supposing that Mrs. Aspenel did not object.

'Go and come as you like. End your days in peace; and—pray for me—pray for me.'

'I will, sir; I do; we all do. And surely our prayers have been answered,' she replied, simply.

He groaned, and, with the strange longing for variety that had seized upon him, said he wanted either his wife or Janet.

The preparations for the wedding were expedited at his repeated request; but he desired that no one outside their immediate family should be informed of the day on which it was to take place. As if to humour his selfishness—for such it really was—Lady Ascham placed her house at Gerard and Edith's disposal, while they took and furnished one for themselves. She had been ordered abroad for the winter months, having over-worked herself in her various benevolent schemes; for people wear themselves out in more ways than one. Pleasure, literature, art, business of all kinds, religion, even charity, muddle the brain and disorganise the frame-work, when carried on beyond the design of the Creator.

It is to be hoped that Gerard may not follow the fashion of overstepping the limits of his powers. He has a certain amount of common-sense, which most of

us have not in these days of steam and general excitement.

But he had a sensible mother, and we are told that the best men are those who have had the best mothers. He was certainly as good as most men, and his mother had done her best to make him so. She rejoiced in trembling at the immense responsibilities before him, and the mother and son had many serious talks and many united prayers over his future. Both placed it under the guidance of the Most High, and left it in His hands. Both knew that Edith would be a helpful and tender wife, and her happiness made all about her happy. As to her friends, the ladies of the Cottages, they overpowered her with congratulations and presents. But they and everybody else were sadly distressed that the wedding-day was not publicly announced.

Certain impediments sorely troubled

Mrs. Aspenel and Janet. A wedding was a wedding, and should, at least, be decently conducted.

'I am bridesmaid, Bruce best man, and you and Mrs. Clarville company,' laughed Janet. 'But who is to give her away? The Queen gives her daughters away, why should not Mrs. Clarville or you? But neither of you is quite her mother. I must have it out with papa.'

Janet rushed off, unsummoned, to her father's room. She found him alone, walking up and down. He tottered, and she offered her arm:

'You are much stronger, papa,' she said, as they took two or three turns, his left arm in her right.

'I think I am,' he replied.

'We have settled everything except the day and who is to give her away,' she blurted out.

'I will give her away, and the day will be to-morrow,' he said.

His tone and manner were those of the former Mr. Aspenel, as known before the fire. Janet did not venture to make a comment.

'I have arranged it all in my own mind: The carriage will come at eleven to take Mrs. Aspenel, Edith, and you for a drive. I shall accompany you. One must make an effort sooner or later. Nurse True will take Bruce for a walk. Gerard and Mrs. Clarville will start at the same time; we shall meet at the church, where we shall find Mr. Austen, and the marriage will take place.'

Janet laughed.

'That is very amusing, and quite original,' she said. 'You spoke as if you were rehearsing a part. Just like Mr. Loveridge—Uncle Will, I mean. Your voices are alike sometimes.'

'I am quite serious. This must not transpire. You must manage it. We will come back here to luncheon. The carriage can take them to the station for the four o'clock train. Listen, Janet. I have been married three times. I have seen enough of presents, and diamonds, and laces, and wreaths, and champagne, and wedding-breakfasts generally. I hate the whole paraphernalia. Besides, it costs a fortune, and I am really——; but, never mind, Gerard will see into that. Ruin doesn't matter so much, when one is maimed and scarred.'

Everything was carried out according to Mr. Aspenel's wishes. If it was difficult to oppose them when he was in health, it was impossible now. Gerard's and Edith's jumped with them. Of all things they desired a quiet, unobtrusive wedding.

And they certainly had it. Still they were none the less solemnly pledged to

one another, and, if anything could have enhanced the solemnity, it was the presence of Mr. Aspenel. He looked what he was, a broken-down but penitent man. Although he had been thrice wed, the words of the marriage-service never came home to him before. How had he kept the promises he had made? He had never given them a thought. He had possibly hastened the deaths of two wives and alienated the third. It was no excuse for him that they had all been married to him for his money; he should have performed his part according to his vow. The terrors that had taken possession of him after the fire returned to him as he listened to the promises and exhortations of the solemn service. He believed that they were made and heard reverently and conscientiously by those who stood before the altar to be united into one. But what of himself? He looked at his wife, and her face seemed

troubled also. Was she reflecting on his conduct, or did conscience prick her with those goads against which it is worse than useless to kick? Could he atone for the past, or was it too late? He glanced at Nurse True, who was always repeating that it was 'never too late.' She, who had been so faithful to her promise, was weeping as women will weep at such times, though perfectly happy at her darling's prospects. Her face was calm, smooth, and cheerful, for she had done her duty.

His mind grew confused until the ceremony was concluded, and then he followed mechanically to the vestry. When all was over, a joyous peal of bells announced to the neighbours that a wedding had taken place; but no curious eyes looked on, for the ringers had been carefully secreted by Mr. Austen in the belfry. The bride and bridegroom walked down the aisle just as Jack and Fan had

done a short time before, but Edith was clad in white, and veiled. So was Janet. The only occurrence worthy of note was, that Mr. Aspenel offered his arm to his wife, and they walked together to their carriage.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DOXOLOGY.

'"THERE IS more joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth, than over ninety-and-nine just persons that need no repentance." Read that again, Janet.'

Janet read it again.

'If this is true, I begin to understand your self-sacrifice, child, and my wife's forgiveness and strange submission. You are really glad that I have repented, and am spared to make some reparation. Joy among the angels! Oh, Janet.'

'Yes, dear papa. It is exceedingly wonderful.'

The father and daughter were silent awhile. They were in his study, which had been rebuilt, together with the rest of the house. Over a year had passed since Edith's wedding, and many events had happened in the interim.

'Will you read me that last letter from my brother? He has also repented; but it is difficult to begin a new life, Janet, very difficult. One is tempted to extremes. He is becoming saving, and—well, I trust all to Gerard. I have no confidence in myself since that awful warning.'

Janet took a letter from a case, and read it. It contained an account of what the writer called his settlement. He had named it 'Brand's Welcome,' for he had resumed his original name. Jack and Fan worked away in their log-house, while he planned and laid out a sort of refuge for the destitute. Some of his old gipsy friends had

already joined him, while Gerard had helped a few able-bodied labourers and mechanics to emigrate also. He said that his scheme answered superbly, and that, if only Government would follow his example, people, such as he had been, might become respectable members of society. 'Not that we have much society out here. Jack, Fan, and the baby constitute mine; but they make noise enough for a colony,' he wrote.

'Harton is really going out,' interrupted Aspenel. 'He says he must see his grandchild.'

'Yes, papa. Fan writes him an entreaty almost weekly. She comments on her baby as if it were a young Sphinx, and says everybody ought to see it. She gives me a pressing invitation. But the most wonderful thing of all is that Mrs. Lee, the old Tigress, is about to emigrate. She tells Gerard and Lady Ascham that she

must end her days where there is plenty of space and pure air, and that she will preach to the Indians, and visit Fan as often as she can.'

'What will become of Hoplands while Harton is away?'

'He says Miss Vigors has undertaken to superintend it; but I fancy Mr. Tom Harton will return from abroad about that time.'

'Who told you that?'

Mr. Aspenel's face suddenly resumed its old expression of suspicion, but Janet's was open and unclouded. She said that she had heard it from Nurse True, who had probably heard it from report.

'He will find no opening for his schemes, if he has any,' said Mr. Aspenel, with what Mrs. Aspenel used to call his 'foxey' look.

'I should think not,' returned Janet, avoiding his glance. 'Bruce is at school, so he cannot expect to be his tutor.

Bruce's last letter was wonderfully improved. Our son and heir will astonish the county some day.'

The father sighed. It is painful to think of the glories of one's successor.

'Is this stupid ceremonial to take place to-day?' he said, irritably. 'How can they afford tea at the Homes? I suppose you must go.'

'Not if you want me, papa.'

Janet's voice indicated possible disappointment if she were 'wanted.'

'You are getting tired of me, Janet. So is Mrs. Aspenel. Everybody is worn out except Nurse True.' He took up a pen. 'I shall soon be able to write with this hand, and then I shall not want you.'

'Oh, papa! I thought you had given up that idea—I mean, that we are tired of you. I intend to be your secretary so long as we both live, and I am sure Mrs. Aspenel devotes herself entirely to you.'

'Is it for what she expects to get, Janet? She only thought of my money when she married me.'

Janet was often pained and disconcerted by questions such as these, which she always answered by such an indignant negative that he did not repeat them. This was, however, answered by Mrs. Aspenel in person. She looked so bright and handsome; so well-dressed and attractive, that he was fain to withdraw it. The 'pity' which is 'akin to love' had usurped the place of resentment in her bosom, and she did her best to soothe the irritable, broken-down, but really penitent man.

'If you will spare Janet, I will stay with you,' she said. 'Gerard and Edith are to be at the Cottages at four, and to return here to dinner and sleep. This is the last arrangement.'

'You had better both go. Nurse True

will do all I want,' he said, glancing in a melancholy way from his handsome wife to his really beautiful daughter. When he looked at them, he always reproached himself for what might have been.

'Thank you, papa,' said Janet, gaily. 'I will tell you all about everything when we return. Here is the review you were reading, and here is Gerard's last account, which you may like to look over against he comes.'

She left the study with her step-mother, and they were soon on their way to the Cottages. The 'stupid ceremonial' alluded to by Mr. Aspenel was the celebration of the centenary of the Homes. The ladies had invited their neighbours to a festival in the shape of 'afternoon-tea.' And a festival it really was, for Mr. Aspenel had been so worked upon by Gerard and his conscience that he had restored the Homes,

and the restoration had just been completed.

'Five afternoon-teas all of a row,' cried Janet; 'must we imbibe five cups of tea?'

A surprise awaited them. Although it was full early in the year for out-of-door festivities, tables were laid on the lawn, and the ladies were there to receive them. The Cottages were restored, both inside and out; the gardens were embellished by bedding-out plants from the Park, and all was spick-and-span as art and nature combined could make it. Gerard and Edith had arrived, and were inspecting everything with childish glee. They were almost mobbed by the ladies, who hustled one another in their zeal to display all the improvements. A tenant for the sixth cottage had been found, but had not yet arrived.

'Isn't it splendid, miss; isn't it 'eavenly,'

said Miranda to Janet. 'I shan't never like any other place so well.'

That damsel was about to be married, and this was as it should be, since Mrs. Clarville had, after much persistent entreaty, promised to vacate the cottage and live with her son and daughter in town. She had been induced to yield, to give up what she called, laughingly, her 'dependent independence,' by the representation that she would make room for some other lady, and help Gerard, Edith, and Lady Ascham to level the mountain of poverty, discontent, and oppression which rose in their midst. Gerard and Edith had taken a house not far from Lady Ascham, and they laboured together to reduce the colossus aforesaid to a pigmy. Hard, and, apparently, impossible work; yet perhaps to be achieved if everybody's hand was ready to help.

The family party from the Park was

supplemented by Mr. Austen and Mr. Harton. All the servants, with the addition of the faithful Rebecca, were in attendance, and in the surrounding woods and overarching skies choristers assembled to celebrate a centenary, the first year of which was inaugurated by their remote ancestors.

Much court was paid to Mrs. Aspenel, and she received an ovation of thanks as the representative of her husband.

'I wish he were here!' said Miss Vigors, with more politeness than truth.

There was much cheerful and pleasant talk which it is not needful to record. The restoration and embellishment of the Cottages were due to Gerard, and all united in belauding him, while Janet declared him a 'Jack of all trades.' He and his Edith were so happy and prosperous, and continuing to do so much good both at home and abroad, that people would have

been afraid of them had they not been so unaffectedly simple and joyous. As to the White Dove, she flitted about from friend to friend just as she used to do, and, as Miss Lilyton expressed it pathetically, 'It seemed as if she had never been away.' And Gerard was carried off by each lady in turn, to examine some lock, or tap, or twig that might yet be safer than safe if only a last touch were given to it. He was still the Gerard of his boyhood, and everybody's factotum, though exalted to a junior partnership with one who had dismissed him from his service for contumacy.

'I mean to be Gerard and Edith in one,' said Janet, when Mrs. Lucy pathetically lamented their loss. 'Now papa is better, Mrs. Aspenel and I are going to be uncommonly gay.'

'We all wished to convey to Mr. Aspenel our sincere thanks for the renovation of

our homes, and we feel quite renovated with them,' broke in Miss Vigors, who took the part of spokeswoman. 'And we also desire to express our appreciation of your continued affability and kindness, Mrs. Aspenel.'

'I hope to see more of you in the future than I have done in the past,' returned Mrs. Aspenel, who knew very well that those infallible women had made very pronounced comments on her absence from her home.

'Let bygones be bygones,' said Miss Vigors, majestically. 'We end our hundredth year in peace, and begin a new century in plenty.'

'Not quite so old as that, though I am over four-score,' said Miss Short, who was as hale as ever.

'Annuitants never die,' whispered Mr. Harton to Janet.

'We're all getting old together. Let us

sing the Doxology,' said Mr. Austen. 'Lead it off, Miss Janet.'

And there, beneath the eaves of the peaceful cottages, they all sang:

> 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow,
> Praise Him all creatures here below;
> Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;
> Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.'

Meanwhile, Mr. Aspenel felt very lonely. It was the first time he had been left so long quite to himself, since the fire. He took up the review, put it down again. He tried to master Gerard's account, and failed. The self-reliant, self-concentrated man could now do nothing by himself. The brain of the financial genius had partially given way, and so long as he lived he would mainly be dependent upon others, not only for his beloved calculations and accumulations, but for such amusement as was within his reach. He was slowly learning the lesson we must all learn sooner

or later, that we are, or should be, members one of another, and depend on each other.

When his family returned from their little *fête*, they found him unusually placid, and, when his wife gave the message sent by the ladies, he smiled with some degree of satisfaction, and listened to Janet's account of the proceedings and graphic description of the entertainment as if it interested him. But he soon dismissed the womankind, and was left alone with Gerard. He always laid everything before him, and on this occasion the accounts were tolerably satisfactory. But, what with losses of vessels, failures of speculations, closing of mines, the fire, and innumerable other causes, the Aspenel millions had greatly dwindled down. However, he was still a very rich man, and the firm of Aspenel and Clarville was rising in public estimation; for, somehow or other,

millionaires and misers are always suspicious characters in the eyes of the world, which will inquire,

'How did he get it all?'

'I shall dine with you to-day. I shall go for a drive to-morrow,' said Mr. Aspenel, when the business matters were concluded.

'We shall all be glad. Edith was hoping you might do so as we came down,' returned Gerard.

This announcement caused a great commotion, for he had not dined with his wife since her return, and dinner was laid in the breakfast-room. He took his seat opposite her without comment. Janet sat next to him and helped him. He was tolerably cheerful, but the others tried in vain to be gay.

After dinner they adjourned, as of old, to the big drawing-room. He asked for some music, and they all did their best to sing; but even Janet felt a curious de-

pression. Mrs. Aspenel and Edith remembered that evening when they last met there together with Tom Harton.

'What was it they sang at the Cottages, Janet?' he asked.

'The Doxology, papa.'

'Sing it.'

They sang it with voices trembling with emotion.

'I, too, would praise God. There is joy among the angels. Let us begin a new life,' he murmured.

They all gathered round him, wondering at the strange words. He was quite sane. He meant them. He was not about to die, as they almost fancied.

'We will begin a new life,' said his wife; and his children joined in a glad Amen.

THE END.

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